The New Criterion

May 1992

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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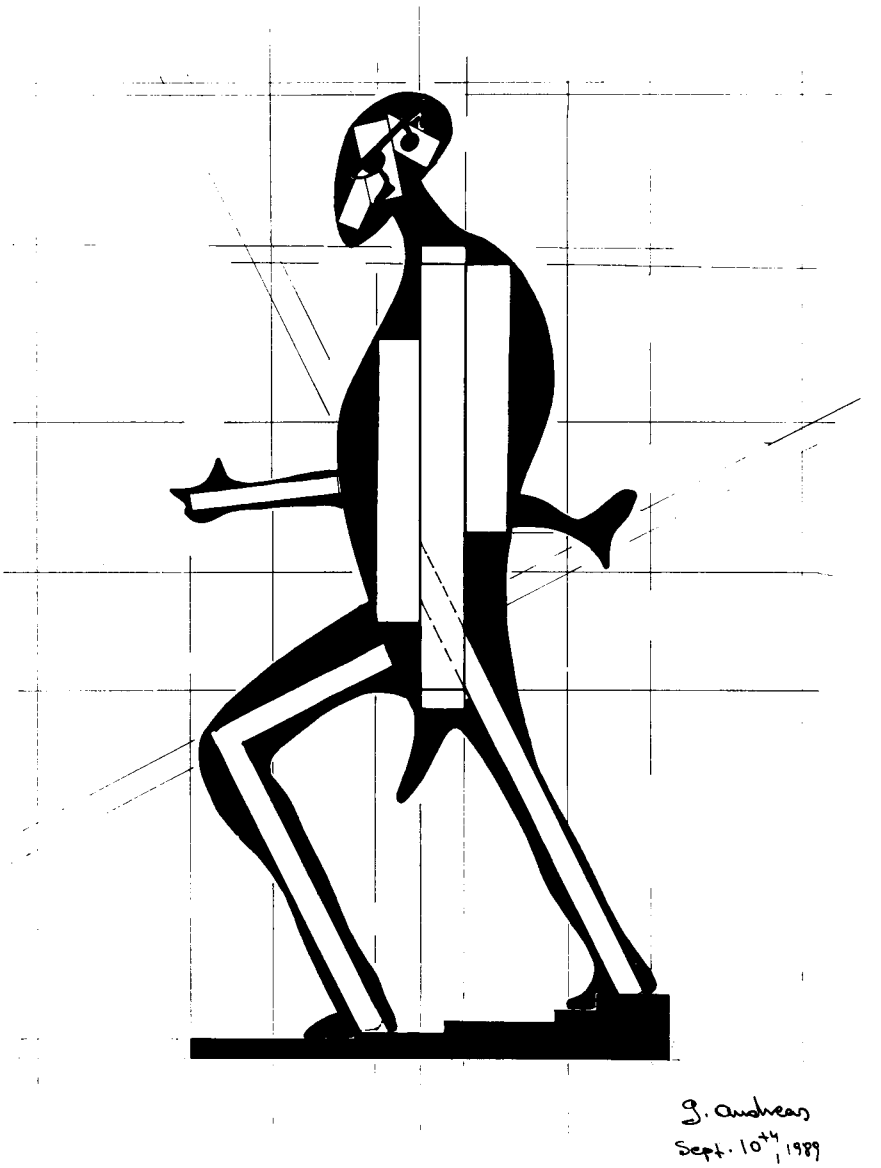

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The New Criterion *May 1992*

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Notes & Comments: May 1992

A Pulitzer for liberal piety

It has long been recognized that there is a distinct political dimension to the awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes. Briefly stated, the Pulitzers favor the expression of liberal opinion. No other mode of political belief is considered eligible for Pulitzer consideration. It is thus the main business of the Pulitzer committees to hand out the Prizes to other liberals, both in the press and in the arts.

Exactly what constitutes liberal opinion at any given moment may vary, of course, but only within certain limits. Once upon a time liberal opinion tended to be anti-Communist. It was also opposed to quota systems in employment, in college admissions, and in other spheres of public life. No longer. As we all know, the anti-Communist component of liberalism proved to be a casualty of the Vietnam War, and anti-quota sentiment made its embarrassed exit from liberal opinion in the face of "affirmative action" programs. What had been established as liberal doctrine one day was declared to be illiberal—if not something worse: conservative—the next. What remained constant was that the Pulitzer Prizes continued to be lavished upon whatever was thought to constitute liberal orthodoxy at the moment.

This year's Pulitzers were no different, in this respect, from last year's, or indeed from those in many recent years. What is interesting, however, is to see what specific mutations in the expression of liberal opinion are now being singled out for commendation. From this perspective, the most emblematic of this year's Pulitzers was the award to Anna Quindlen, the often angry, always lachrymose columnist for *The New York Times*, in the category called "Commentary."

Quindlen, who writes a twice-a-week syndicated column called "Public & Private," represents a significant development in liberal journalism. It is a development that has little or nothing to do with liberal punditry of the old school, with its high ideals of civic virtue and its aura of moral uplift. It focuses instead almost entirely upon what has come to be called lifestyle. It is mainly concerned, in other words, with the emancipation and gratification of the self. From the perspective of this new mode of lifestyle liberalism, all political thought is judged according to its contribution or opposition to an expanding, non-negotiable agenda of personal emancipation.

Given this preoccupation with the self, lifestyle liberalism has inevitably created a new mode of liberal journalism that specializes in self-promotion and self-exculpation. What

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used to be known as private life, whether the journalist's own or that of his subjects, becomes the principal peg and focus of all political and social analysis. Indeed, lifestyle becomes the only politics worth talking about, the only politics that are really believed in. Society comes to be looked upon exclusively as a coefficient of personal autonomy, and where it fails to meet the requisite standard in assisting the self in its pursuit of immediate gratification, it is condemned as repressive.

One result of this lifestyle liberalism is that it tends to turn all journalistic discourse into a species of political soap opera. Which is to say that it sentimentalizes politics to a degree that places it beyond the reach of intelligent argument. Journalism written out of this lifestyle imperative is not so much a mode of reporting or analysis as it is a form of emotional blackmail. "Every four years," we were told in a recent Quindlen column, "idealism seizes me by the throat and I wait for a white knight. Perhaps this is the character flaw of someone whose first seminal political act was kneeling on a linoleum floor, saying a rosary with the sixth grade the day John F. Kennedy was killed." In a column the same week, however, her rosary wasn't much in evidence as Quindlen campaigned once again for abortion rights, though there were some ironic invocations of "God's law" and "my study of the Bible." Whatever the issue, there is always the same Quindlen scenario of outraged virtue and self-satisfied liberal piety.

Another result of this lifestyle journalism is that it inevitably leads to wholesale violations of the very privacy—including that of the writer—it believes itself to be exalting. The title of Anna Quindlen's column, "Public & Private," says it all. Every public issue is turned into a private psychodrama while the old liberal notion of the commonwealth is martyred on the altar of the self and its unappeasable needs and desires. It is the ultimate paradox of this lifestyle liberal journalism that it looks more and more to the state to guarantee the autonomy of the self as the first principle of social policy, thus ensuring greater and greater political control over our private lives.

Anna Quindlen didn't invent this mode of lifestyle liberal journalism. It had become a staple of the feminist press—and of the swiftly expanding feminist component of the mainstream press—long before she won her slot on the op-ed pages of the nation's newspapers. She is merely its latest captive and beneficiary. In conferring one of its Prizes upon this melancholy example of degeneration in journalistic standards, the Pulitzer organization has once again made a notable contribution to the decline of the American press.

Deutsche Grammophon's "All★Star Cards"

It had to come. The huge sums currently being pulled in by sports stars and media heroes have been noticed by classical-music celebrities and those who market them. Sauce for the pop-goose is now sauce for the art-gander, and we are only beginning to see the repackaging of serious performers for the mass—and young—market.

A case in point is the decision of Deutsche Grammophon, the mighty German classical-record label, to circulate to the press a deck of thirty-eight "All★Star Cards," modeled on the baseball cards so treasured by young American boys of yesteryear. On the front of each card is a glamorous photo of a reigning—or would-be reigning—performer (or group) of the day, and on the back is (in the case of solo performers) the artist's birthday, birth place, place of study, 1992 CD releases, a "Scouting Report," and a personal factlet. The deck begins with conductor Claudio

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Abbado and ends with pianist Krystian Zimerman. In between, there are such undoubted DG superstars as pianist Martha Argerich, soprano Kathleen Battle, conductor Leonard Bernstein, tenor Plácido Domingo, pianist Yevgeny Kissin, and violinist Anne-Sophie Mutter. There are some groups too, such as the Emerson String Quartet and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and such up-and-coming (but as yet little-known) artists as flutist Patrick Gallois and pianist Lilya Zilberstein.

Significantly, the birthdays are without birth years; in today's musical world (unlike in sports), the great are forever young. The "Scouting Reports" are invariably couched in hyperbole; for the purposes of these DG cards, everyone bats 1.000, and every hit is a home run. And the concluding factlets are almost all trivial and often cutesy: the late Leonard Bernstein "could never choose from his many Swatch watches, so he often wore more than one," conductor Pierre Boulez "loves red wine and good jokes in several languages," harpsichordist/conductor Trevor Pinnock "once took to the stage with two different shoes on," and soprano Cheryl Studer's "alleged favorite dessert is Cherry Strudel."

A good argument could be made that all this is silly and harmless. Reputations and careers will doubtless be decided in the future as they have been in the past, by excellence and the opinions of music lovers. And yet there is something at work in this kind of selling that isn't quite so silly and harmless. Behind this DG marketing initiative must lie an awareness that the present scale of economic activity in music can only be enlarged, or even maintained—by an appeal to a new, uneducated, and unsophisticated audience. This new audience, if it exists at all, is predominantly young and as yet unformed. In appealing to it, DG is only echoing the consciously made policy decision of our leading American orchestras to arrange concert programs and publicity campaigns so as to appeal, not to those who are already coming to concerts, but to those who have not as yet come. What is so dangerous about this new approach to getting an audience is that it places the emphasis on attendance as a good in itself, not on the music. As with body counts on the battlefield, numbers are all. It is sad indeed that so many first-class artists are only too happy to let themselves be used in the cheapening of what was once a noble profession.

From the archives of the academy:

"What is a museum? Museums are no longer built in the image of that nationalistic temple of culture, the British Museum. Today, almost anything may turn out to be a museum. . . . The experience of going to a museum is often closer to that of going to a theme park or a funfair than that which used to be offered by the austere, glass-case museum. . . . In the past . . . the 'general public' was offered carefully designed exhibitions which had been researched with scholarly precision, and which presented themes and topics of complete absorption to the curator. Those people who did not share this fascination . . . were regarded as somehow deficient. Now the 'client' demands active rights and expects good service. A 'client' has a contract for the delivery of goods or services, and is in a negotiated situation where he or she has an equal position of power."

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Lecturer in Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, in *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (Routledge, 1992).

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"The present is history": conducting culture at Bard

by Roger Kimball

To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their meaning.
—Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

There can be little doubt that academic and artistic culture in this country has undergone seismic changes over the last few decades. Some of these changes paralleled laudable social reforms and led, at least initially, to fruitful though generally minor scholarly and artistic innovations. Most have been considerably less beneficent. To be sure, because the changes that began in the Sixties continue to reverberate all around us, it is sometimes difficult to get one's bearings and tell which is which. Part of the confusion is semantic. As Thucydides noted about another period of cultural upheaval, such changes bring about an alteration in the common understanding of certain important words and concepts. Think, for example, about how the meaning of terms like "the humanities," "literary criticism," or "liberal education" have mutated in recent years. Just as a reminder—in case the use of "seismic" seems hyperbolic—consider the following few sentences from a recent book by one of the most fashionable and influential "literary critics" now writing:

> [W]e must also disentangle from the social version of group difference (as well as from the philosophical debates on the difference between contradiction and opposition) the reigning aesthetic and psychic (or psychoanalytic) forms of this topic, not least because any number of political category-mistakes can often be identified as illicit transfers from the aesthetic itself). The aesthetics of difference—what is often called textuality or textualization—foregrounds a perceptual modification in the apprehension of postmodern artifacts, which I have characterized, in the opening chapter by way of the slogan of "difference relates"; later on I will offer a further, spatial analysis of this new kind of perception. As for the psychic subject and its theories, this is the area colonized by the Deleuze-Guattari notion of the ideal schizophrenic—that psychic subject who "perceives" by way of difference and differentiation alone, if that is conceivable; of course [!], the conceiving of it is the construction of an ideal which is, so to speak, the ethical—not to say the political—task proposed by their *Anti-Oedipus*.

Admittedly, it is difficult not to admire the audacity of that summary "of course" (and, assuming it was intentional, what we might call the postmodernist gesture of that extra parenthesis as well). But this cheery snippet, chosen virtually at random from Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, nonetheless does remind us that literary criticism in the academy has undergone fearsome changes since (for example) T. S. Eliot described the function of criticism as the "elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste."

Analogous changes have transformed the

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art world, as anyone who has troubled to keep up with current exhibitions and the commentary accompanying them knows. There, too, fundamental changes have threatened to recast the common vocabulary. What began with the acerb solvents of Dada and Surrealism took on the aspect of a joke with the advent of Pop Art. The result is that today such basic terms as "taste," "beauty," "quality," "connoisseurship," and even "art" itself have fallen into desuetude or have acquired unwonted tentacles of irony, bewilderment, and contempt.

About both developments it may be objected that what have changed are not so much the phenomena themselves—criticism is still criticism, taste taste, and art art—but the way these activities tend to be understood and practiced in our most prominent institutions. Perhaps so. But this is small consolation. For what we are witnessing is the institutional disenfranchisement of our intellectual and artistic culture. There is plenty of good art being made today, just as there is plenty of intelligent criticism. But more and more, both tend to be all but underground activities, pursued apart from and often in opposition to the official culture of our new Salons: the academy and the art world. That these institutions have appropriated the rhetoric and bad manners of the avant-garde while enforcing a rigid conformism of their own is merely an additional irony.

Those interested in charting the course of this cultural fever will have noticed the emergence of some curious hybrid symptoms lately as the art world has become increasingly academicized and the once circumspect guardians of the academic eyries have groveled to embrace every latest artistic fad and trend in popular culture. The rapid proliferation of the "humanities institute" on campuses across the country has turned out to be a particularly dubious development. For almost without exception, these institutes are profoundly *anti*-humanistic in spirit. Under the banner of "Cultural Studies," multiculturalism, and kindred left-wing fabrications, they claim to carry on innovative scholarship outside the "constraints" of traditional disciplinary boundaries. In fact, they are largely devices for circumventing the demands of scholarship and for pursuing a thoroughly politicized vision of the humanities.

It was only a matter of time before someone came up with the idea of doing to the arts what the humanities institute has done to the humanities. After all, since the traditional distinctions among disciplines are now to be considered otiose, what's the difference between the two? Are not both primarily "political"? And yet how much more hip and more "creative" a multi-disciplinary arts institute sounds than a multi-disciplinary humanities institute. No one who has followed the career of Leon Botstein will be surprised to discover that he is riding noisily on this bandwagon. Since 1975, Mr. Botstein has presided over Bard College, a small but inveterately trendy liberal-arts institution tucked away in a beautiful spot in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Part academic impresario, part amateur music conductor (of the Hudson Valley Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra, among others), part New Age administrator, President Botstein deserves his hard-earned reputation as a man who can re-package any prevailing fashion in the garb of progressive wisdom. It comes of being adaptable. Bard's publicity flyers trumpet the college's adherence to liberal democratic values. As far as I know, neither treason nor perjury has yet been enlisted in the catalogue of liberal values. But this oversight did not prevent the baton-wielding president of Bard from honoring Alger Hiss—who was convicted of perjury in 1950 after the statute of limitations made the charge of espionage impossible to prosecute—by establishing the Alger Hiss Chair of Social Studies at Bard. The current occupant of that chair is Joel Kovel, author of *Against the State of Nuclear Terror*, *In Nicaragua*, *The Radical Spirit: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Society*, and other edifying works.

Yet the establishment of the Alger Hiss Chair of Social Studies is only a small ex-

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ample of President Botstein's talent for innovation. Like most college presidents these days, he has had to devote himself tirelessly to the task of raising money. In addition to pursuing his hobby of orchestra conducting, however, President Botstein has been notably successful in billing himself as a cultural critic and music historian. He has thereby managed the trick—difficult for a college president—of maintaining his *bona fides* as a genuine intellectual even while superintending and expanding the Bard fiefdom. His latest combination of intellect and enterprise is the Richard and Marieluise Black Center for Curatorial Studies and Art in Contemporary Culture, one of several "satellite" institutions he has initiated under Bard's aegis.

If the full name of what we will henceforth refer to simply as the Black Center seems like a mouthful, it is not due exclusively to pomposity. Anyone familiar with bureaucracies —think of Dickens's Circumlocution Office —knows that polysyllabism can be an important aid in intellectual façade-building, and so it is here. Then, too, vague but impressive-sounding titles can help in the never-ending task of fund-raising. And when one reads that the Black Center is "an institution of national and international significance for the study of late twentieth-century art in contemporary culture," one knows that the ambient buzz one hears in Annandale-on-Hudson includes the sound of grant applications zinging hither and yon.

The rhetoric that has attended the recent opening of the Black Center has been especially—well, not eloquent, exactly, but certainly grandiose. Among the ten points describing "The Mission" are: (point three) "to create a coherent, multidisciplinary perspective from which to study art, culture, and society in the late twentieth century," and (point four) "to generate new models for future generations with respect to the viewing and understanding of art and its function in the creation of historic consciousness."

In a brief presentation to the press in early April, President Botstein explained that the Black Center would be "radically different" from traditional curatorial or art-history programs, both of which he scorned as having "survived beyond their utility." He began by describing conventional museum-studies programs, which train aspiring curators in the painstaking craft of connoisseurship, as "intellectually bankrupt." When challenged about this characterization later, he admitted that "to keep people awake" he had "exaggerated the claim." Still, he maintained that most museum-studies programs were "merely technical" and without sufficient "intellectual weight." Similarly, he said, art history as traditionally conceived was "no longer adequate in its current disciplinary frame." Among much else, it suffers from a kind of "disciplinary isolation." Moreover, according to President Botstein, art historians of the past—he mentioned the great scholars Heinrich Wölfflin and Jacob Burckhardt in passing—have been insufficiently grounded in other disciplines. We could have suggested he throw in that narrow specialist Erwin Panofsky, as well. Fortunately, though, the Black Center, which he looked forward to as an "exemplary" multidisciplinary institution, has arrived to change all that and save us from the myopia of intellectual lightweights like Wölfflin and Burckhardt. When pressed about his implying that the Black Center was unique, President Botstein demurred, noting that "even my arrogance has limits." It would have been enlightening to know just where he would have us draw the boundary.

Perhaps the most telling of all President Botstein's formulations was his slogan "the present is history." It is upon this marvelous idea—which amounts to little more than a denial of history—that the "multidisciplinary" elysium he envisions must be built. For only someone who believed that "the present is history" could be so scornful of tradition and the past as to contemplate jettisoning the rich inheritance of art history or the canons of connoisseurship for the hermetic inanities of deconstruction, post-structuralism, "gender studies," or other

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examples of contemporary "multidisciplinary" effluvia. It's an extraordinary piece of sophistry, not to say cynicism, even for a college president.

Just how committed President Botstein is to such nonsense is unclear. But he knows which way the winds of academic fashion are blowing and is canny enough to spread his net as wide as possible. So the Black Center is a little of this, a little of that. It is, first of all, a new two-year Masters Program at Bard College. Instead of going to some stodgy museum-studies program and actually learning about art, some fifteen students a year can come to Bard and devote themselves to "curatorial studies," taking courses in just about anything—philosophy, psychology, sociology, economics, literature—in order to "apply" whatever was picked up to art and the task of putting together exhibitions. Bard gets their tuition and they get, well, a multidisciplinary stew and a soothing sense of being on the cutting edge of history. But there is more. The Black Center is also a "research" facility that will accommodate a number of "visiting scholars." As things stand now, it is envisioned that the entire faculty, apart from the director, will be visiting, with tenure estimated anywhere from two months to two years. The basic idea, it seems, is to attract as many big names as possible from the museum and academic worlds to take a bit of a paid vacation in Annandale-on-Hudson in exchange for chatting up some students. Why not? It's a comely stretch of woods, and, besides, we are told that the Black Center will also house "a major research archive" that the assembled scholars will doubtless want to busy themselves examining.

And there is still more. The real impetus behind the Black Center was the large pile of money that the Blacks, Richard and Marieluise, gave to Bard to build and endow a new building. They also donated their collection of contemporary art, which dates from the mid-Sixties. Beginning with Minimalism, the collection currently consists of about 550 pieces: paintings, drawings, sculpture, photographs, and video installations. Bard hopes to continue acquiring representative works through the end of the century. Except for some works from Mexico, the collection is disconcertingly predictable: there are one or two things from almost every trendy name active in America and Germany during the period.

The Blacks have dubbed their collection the Rivendell Collection, after a fictional dwelling in *The Lord of the Rings*. A press release tells us that Mrs. Black had in mind the "rejuvenative powers" of art when she chose the name: Rivendell was "a perfect house. . . . Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear or sadness." This is a touching testimony, and one is pleased to find a contemporary collector so enthusiastic about art. But one may perhaps be forgiven for wondering what Tolkein's Hobbits or Elves or Ents would have thought about living among the artworks the Blacks have assembled. Has anyone ever accused John Chamberlain's crushed bits of automobiles of being a "cure for weariness"? Or Donald Judd's boxes? Or Richard Serra's minatory hunks of rusted steel? One doubts, at any rate, that any of the sixty or seventy works on view in the inaugural exhibition at the Black Center, "Passions and Cultures: Selected Works from the Rivendell Collection, 1967-1991," would hold much appeal for a Hobbit.

It's curious to note the appeal they have for Mrs. Black. In a statement accompanying the exhibition, she recounts how as a young woman she got interested in art by visiting the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Munich. The chic atmosphere, a meeting place for artists and intellectuals, was as exciting as the art. "It was," she writes, "like entering a cult group." One may hazard that the appeal of the Black Center—assuming it exercises an appeal—will be primarily of this nature.

By far the most successful part of the project is the building that houses it. Designed by the Chicago architects James Goettsch and Nada Andric, the low-slung, 38,000 square-foot structure provides a neat,

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unpretentious place to look at and study modern art. The main exhibition spaces, occupying two barrel-vaulted pavilions that recall the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, are well proportioned, well lighted, and reasonably flexible. There are no frills. But if the building has an unmistakably institutional feel—the modest budget did not allow for lavishness—the architects have managed to turn that necessity to their advantage. Mr. Goettsch, who was primarily responsible for the design, has succeeded admirably in imparting the improvised atmosphere of a SoHo loft to his building. It seems entirely appropriate for the kind of art likely to be exhibited at the Black Center.

Unfortunately, the artistic value of the works that will be exhibited there is another question altogether, as is the educational value of the Black Center's "multidisciplinary" vision of curatorial studies. We can begin to get a better understanding of exactly what President Botstein and his lieutenants have in mind by taking a brief look at some of the events that Bard sponsored in early April to celebrate the opening of the Black Center. It was an ambitious program, two days of celebratory activities including a four-part conference titled "Art and Context: Exhibition, Interpretation, and Curatorship in the Late Twentieth Century," a lecture by President Botstein himself, and a concert that included pieces by Elliott Carter, John Cage, and Steve Reich, as well as a "video opera" in which the multimedia artist Nam June Paik (honorary Doctor of Fine Arts, Bard College 1990), among others, participated. The conference sessions, on "The Curator's Task," "Theory and Exhibition," "Contemporary Art in Museum Settings," and "Contemporary Art in Exhibition" featured a long list of prominent names from the art world, including Kirk Varnedoe from the Museum of Modern Art, Kathy Halbreich from the Walker Art Center, the editor and journalist Ingrid Sischy, and such artists as Eric Fischl, Jeff Koons, and Tim Rollins.

It would have been instructive to attend all these events, but it is an imperfect world and we had to content ourselves with sitting through Conference Session II, "Theory and Exhibition." The participants were the academic critics Rosalind Krauss, who is soon to depart her Distinguished Professorship at Hunter College for a position at Columbia University; Yve-Alain Bois, the Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., Professor of Modern Art at Harvard University; the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk; the artists Joseph Kosuth and Adrian Piper; and the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, who writes for *The Village Voice* and sundry other publications. Richard Sennett, the well-known sociologist and guru of kinder, gentler cities, moderated.

The most amusing parts of the session were undoubtedly the contributions by Mr. Kosuth, who delivered an often hilarious defense of the artist's prerogative to theorize about his own work, and Mr. Schjeldahl, who stressed the importance of first-hand acquaintance with works of art and who wondered whether the academic addiction to "theory" wasn't often part of an effort by curators and critics to "infantilize the audience." Professor Sloterdijk waxed mistily philosophical about art's revelatory capacity, while Adrian Piper treated us to a confused summary of Kant's notion of experience before proceeding to call for an exhibition that investigated the "real power relations" that held sway in society.

The real focus of the session, however, were the initial contributions, by Professors Krauss and Bois. They shared with us their efforts to organize an exhibition around the idea of the *informe*. This idea, which comes from the French surrealist writer Georges Bataille, has long been an object of veneration for Professor Krauss. Elsewhere, quoting Bataille, she has explained that the idea of *informe* "comes down to saying that the world is something like a spider or a piece of spit." Obviously, this is a subject crying out for an exhibition. Accompanying their presentations with slides of some of the, ah, work they might show in an exhibition devoted to the *informe*, Professors Krauss and Bois expatiated on its manifold

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attractions. Following Bataille, they distinguished between the meaning of a word and the "job" it performs; they spoke glowingly about the job of the *informe*, which is to render things "declassé," "to knock meaning itself off its pedestal," "to deliver against it a low blow."

It gets even better. In order to do justice to the *informe*, they explained, one must have recourse to the scatological—for the *informe*, as Professor Krauss put it, "courts the look of the excremental." Other analogies that they mentioned were mud, filth, and trash. Their main problem, it seems, was how to organize an exhibition around a concept that is itself a "non-concept," how to give visual form to a principle that is a denial of form. Of course, as anyone familiar with the writings of this dynamic duo will have guessed, the case for the *informe* was not put forward so simply. Everything was wrapped up in the chilly argot of post-structuralism and delivered with the arch epistemological humorlessness and hothouse leftism that Professor Krauss, especially, has made her trademark.

When the lights went up, the audience looked more than usually dazed. I was not surprised to hear one audience member observe to his neighbor that the presentations epitomized everything that was wrong with the academy today. Indeed, as with so much about the Black Center, Professors Krauss and Bois's gibberish about the *informe* put one in mind of *Pictures from an Institution*, Randall Jarrell's wicked send-up of a college not unlike Bard. One thinks particularly of Jarrell's chapter on Art Night, and perhaps most especially of the narrator's conversation with a metal sculptor named Miss Rasmussen. "Some of what she said was technical, and you would have had to be a welder to appreciate it; the rest was aesthetic or generally philosophic, and to appreciate it you would have had to be an imbecile."

The presentations by Professor Krauss and Bois provide one good example of what "multidisciplinary" means in today's academic climate: a bit of hermetic theory laced with a dollop of leftist political sentiment. The art, such as it is, is around merely to illustrate or embellish the theory. But it is also important to understand that the Black Center is problematic in other ways as well. The animating idea that the "the present is history" is a prescription for pedagogical irresponsibility, since its effect will be to focus students' attention where it would have gone anyway, on themselves. Moreover, even on its own terms, the Black Center is sure to enforce a narrow, sectarian view of contemporary culture. A press release tells us that the collection "holds a mirror to contemporary art and life." In fact, we are given a highly incomplete reflection of both. This season, works by such accomplished artists as Fairfield Porter, William Bailey, William Scott, Jane Freilicher, Bill Jensen, and Helen Miranda Wilson have been on view at various galleries in New York City. All of these artists have produced important work in the last couple of decades and thus are candidates for the Black Center's collection. But none is represented in the inaugural exhibition of the Rivendell Collection. Why not? A single painting by any of them possesses greater aesthetic merit than a warehouse full of Roy Lichtenstein's cartoons, Jean-Michel Basquiat's scribbles, Cindy Sherman's photographs, or indeed the work of most other artists represented in the collection. The answer is clear: none of the artists I mentioned is on the current hit-parade of politically acceptable artists, and, besides, who cares about asethetic merit anymore?

And this brings us to the real irony attending this "non-traditional" multidisciplinary farrago. Despite the avant-garde rhetoric, the Black Center is the most conventional institution imaginable. It slavishly replicates every academic and museological cliché now reigning, from the addiction to "theory" and blurring of traditional disciplinary boundaries to the rejection of connoisseurship and aesthetic criteria in judging art. In his adherence to these pieties, President Botstein is following the crowd at a moment when the truly innovative and courageous move would have been a return to tradition.

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All that jazz

by Bruce Bawer

Toni Morrison has been thinking about jazz for a long time. In a 1983 interview, insisting that she had little in common with Joyce, Hardy, Faulkner, and other such novelists, she explained that her aim was to capture something of the specifically black "quality of hunger and disturbance" that had "probably only been fully expressed" by jazz, blues, and spirituals. "For a long time," she argued, "the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer *exclusively* ours. . . . So another form has to take its place." That form, of course, is the black novel, which, she suggested, can capture "an ineffable quality . . . that is curiously black." What is astonishing about these remarks is not only Morrison's desire that the work of black artists should be, in some way, identifiably "black," but also her notion that when "black" artworks appeal to whites as well as blacks—and are therefore not "*exclusively*" black—this represents not an achievement but a kind of failure. One can only assume from all this that Morrison has, during her more than two decades as a novelist, been doing precisely what she described in that 1983 interview—namely, writing novels in which she seeks not to be as good a writer as she can be, but to be as good a *black* writer as she can be, doing her best to heal blacks and *not* to transcend racial barriers. It cannot be regarded as anything other than a supreme irony, then, that Morrison's books have won her a huge white reading public—not to mention a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Critics Circle Award, a chair at Princeton, and high reading fees at campuses across the country. One must say that Morrison has taken her failure well.

Those novels share many of the attributes of jazz, blues, and spirituals. By turns sultry and sassy, blissful and bitter, sweet and low-down, her narrators tender firework bursts of joy and violence, repeat the word "love" as if it were a mantra, speak of American hamlets with names like Gilead and Jerusalem, and retail stories of estrangement and heartache with all the no-holds-barred melancholy of a Billie Holiday. Morrison's trademark excesses are those of "black" music: at its weakest, her fiction can be as monotonous as the most pointlessly protracted of modern jazz improvisations, as melodramatic as the most maudlin blues ballad, as mindless as the most hackneyed spiritual. Yet she has risen less and less frequently to the wit and facility of the greatest jazz, the expertly modulated passion of the greatest blues, or the sincere devotional fervor of the greatest spirituals.

Given Morrison's preoccupation with such music, perhaps it was only a matter of time before she published a novel called *Jazz*.[1] This novel—her sixth, and her first since the controversial, Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved*—centers on a couple of sensational incidents that take place in Harlem

1 *Jazz*, by Toni Morrison; Knopf, 229 pages, $21.

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in 1926. In familiar Morrison (and magic-realist) fashion, the opening paragraph provides a lush précis. "I know that woman," an unidentified voice confides.

> She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deep-down, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, "I love you."

That's just the first half-dozen sentences, and already you feel you need to step out for some air. Doubtless the narrative voice is meant to be rich in personality and atmosphere—meant to suggest, perhaps, a woman of a certain age sitting at a Harlem window, her voice warm and husky and lilting (rather like Morrison's—or, perhaps, Sarah Vaughan's) as she tells her neighbors' story. But the voice of this never-to-be-named narrator (who describes herself as "curious, inventive, and well-informed," thereby warning us not to consider her 100 percent reliable) is just a bit *too* rich, its general effect that of a somewhat too heavy perfume. Its frequent descent from vibrant authenticity into glib detachment muddles one's image of the narrator, as do its often sophisticated diction and syntax and its intermittent allusion to the dense, colorful style and the improbable-parable qualities of Gabriel García Márquez (to whom the parrot comes off as something of an *hommage*). The voice is also, as we soon realize, well-nigh omniscient: this woman knows more about the protagonists than *they* do.

Those protagonists are Joe and Violet Trace, a fiftyish black couple from rural Vesper County, Virginia, who relocated to New York in 1906 and who, at the time of the murder, are both in the beauty business: he's a "sample-case man" who peddles cosmetics door-to-door, she's a hairdresser who makes house calls. The third member of the triangle is Dorcas, Joe's eighteen-year-old mistress, whom he kills in a fit of passion for two-timing him with a younger man. As *Beloved* moves back and forth through the lives of a group of Kentucky slaves, so *Jazz* rummages around in the lives of Joe, Violet, Dorcas, and their friends, neighbors, and ancestors, examining the antecedents and consequences of the notorious affair and murder—for which, implausibly, Joe is never arrested, though everyone knows he's guilty. Or is he? For to Morrison, all her protagonists would appear to be victims, the seeds of whose common tragedy lies in their ancestors' bondage and their own past misfortunes. Joe, for instance, was raised by a woman who told him that his parents had "disappeared without a trace"; when he first went to school, accordingly, he gave his name as Joe Trace, because "I understood her to mean the 'trace' they disappeared without was me." The half-cracked Violet's father ran off when she was little, and four years later her mother threw herself down a well; thereafter the girl and her four siblings were raised by their grandmother, True Belle. And Dorcas, orphaned in childhood, was (like Cholly Breedlove in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*) raised by an aunt.

It is that aunt, Alice Manfred, whom Violet (now known locally as Violent) starts to call upon regularly after Dorcas's death. The girl's memory has become "a sickness in the [Traces'] house," and Violet, who never knew her, is desperate to learn more about the person whom she considers her enemy even in death. Though the two women end up on amicable terms, Violet never apologizes for her attack on Dorcas's corpse. "Wouldn't you?" she demands of Alice. "You wouldn't fight for your man?" There's no reply, but the narrator tells us that Alice too was once betrayed by a man and dreamed of attacking her rival with an ice pick or a clothesline rope: "Her favorite, however, the dream that plumped her pillow at night, was seeing herself mount a horse,

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then ride it and find the woman alone on a road and gallop till she ran her down under four iron hooves; then back again, and again until there was nothing left but tormented road dirt signaling where the hussy had been." Such violent dreams, we are apparently meant to understand, figure in the history of every feeling human heart; to love powerfully is to be capable of extraordinary acts of brutality, which are the harvest not of evil but of love rescinded or refused.

Like *Beloved*, then, in which a slave mother kills her cherished infant daughter to deliver her from a life of servitude, *Jazz* contemplates the idea that love can drive one to murder. Of *Beloved*, Morrison told an interviewer: "I wanted it to be our past, which is haunting, and her past, which is haunting—the way memory never really leaves you unless you have gone through it and confronted it head on." *Jazz*, too, is about people haunted by the past who must confront memory. How haunted are they? Here's how haunted: Violet secures from Alice a photograph of Dorcas which she puts on her mantelpiece, and every night she and Joe, unable to sleep, take turns tiptoeing from the bedroom into the living room to look at it. Violet sees only the girl's greed and haughtiness; Joe sees only her sweetness and generosity. Far from helping to heal wounds, the picture's presence keeps the Traces agitated, estranged. Something's got to give, and eventually it does. In *Beloved* the murdered baby returns home twenty years later as a mysterious ghost-woman; similarly, Dorcas—whose namesake, in the Book of Acts, was brought back from the dead by Saint Peter—returns to the Traces' lives in the form of her best friend, Felice. Joe and Violet grow close to Felice, and their bond with her helps them to work out their feelings about Dorcas, and hence to accept, forgive, and reconcile. Or so, at least, we are meant to understand; but though Morrison's intense, lyrical prose keeps demanding that we believe in and care about these people, they always seem to remain at arm's length—perhaps because that prose itself suggests passionate involvement on her part less often than it does a valiant attempt to simulate such involvement.

Not surprisingly, music figures often in *Jazz*, though it tends to remain in the background, part of the atmosphere in which key events occur. An exception occurs relatively early in the novel when we learn that Alice is discombobulated by jazz: it "disturb[s] her peace, making her aware of flesh and something so free she could smell its blood-smell." Alice, the narrator tells us,

> knew from sermons and editorials that [jazz] wasn't real music—just colored folks' stuff: harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious.
>
> Yet Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a kind of careless hunger for a fight or a red ruby stickpin for a tie—either would do. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel house, tonk house, music. It made her hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew or knew about.

Readers of *Beloved* will find *Jazz* familiar in many ways. Once again, "whitepeople" is a single word, implying that caucasians' humanity is inextricable from their racial identity. There are the usual uncontested bits of racist wisdom, among them an old hunter's observation that "the secret of kindness from whitepeople" is that "they had to pity a thing before they could like it." Again one finds an utter lack of humor, an occasional eloquent passage (for instance, a first-rate set piece about the magical impact of sex and music in the metropolis), and intermittent forays into anachronistic pop-psych chitchat (when Felice asks Joe why he killed her, he replies: "Scared. Didn't know how to love anybody"). Yet *Jazz* is, on the whole, more restrained than *Beloved* in al-

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most every way—style, tone, structure, racial anger. Formally, *Jazz* recalls Morrison's relatively tidy second novel, *Sula*; but if its first part weaves elegantly and purposefully among different lives and time frames, its latter part often feels confused and contrived, the narrator's voice giving way for pages at a time to those of Felice and the late Dorcas. (In one long, oddly bemusing passage, moreover, the narrator presents herself not as recounting actual events but as imagining an episode from the previous century—namely a quest-for-the-father anecdote about Golden Gray, the mulatto son of True Belle's owner, whose enigmatic connection to the story of Joe and Violet will doubtless, in years to come, provide grist for many a scholarly article.) Presumably this second-act digression can be accounted for in terms of some musical analogy or other (is Morrison trying to out-Coltrane Coltrane?), but lovers of Ella, Billie, Carmen, and Mahalia may find that *Jazz* doesn't quite put songs in their hearts.

Readers seeking insight into the mind that created *Jazz* may want to look into Morrison's other new book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.[2] Then again, maybe not. This slim volume consists of three essays—originally delivered as lectures at Harvard University—in which Morrison attempts, as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin have done before her, to make a definitive statement about blacks and American fiction. Her focus, however, is not upon black writing but upon the role of blacks in fiction by whites. She has two essential points to make about this subject: (1) that blacks have figured centrally throughout American literature as symbols of the Other by means of which white Americans defined themselves; and (2) that this central role has been utterly ignored by critics. Or, as she puts it, the knowledge generally "accepted by literary historians and critics . . . holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States." She spends most of a page contesting the unattributed view that "white America has considered questions of morality and ethics, the supremacy of mind and the vulnerability of body, the blessings and liability of progress and modernity, without reference to the situation of its black population." Her angry rejoinder to this straw-man argument:

> In what public discourse does the reference to black people not exist? It exists in every one of this nation's mightiest struggles. The presence of black people is not only a major referent in the framing of the Constitution, it is also in the battle over enfranchising unpropertied citizens, women, the illiterate. It is there in the construction of a free and public school system; the balancing of representation in legislative bodies; jurisprudence and legal definitions of justice. It is there in theological discourse; the memoranda of banking houses; the concept of manifest destiny and the preeminent narrative that accompanies (if it does not precede) the initiation of every immigrant into the community of American citizens.

And so on. Morrison warns of "the wanton, elaborate strategies undertaken" by critics to "erase . . . from view" the presence of "Africanism" (a term she has coined to describe "the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people"); she condemns unidentified "statements . . . insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity"; and she charges that "some powerful literary critics in the United States have never read, and are proud to say so, *any* African-American text. . . . [T]he arbiters of critical power in American literature seem to take pleasure in, indeed relish, their ignorance of African-American texts."

2 *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, by Toni Morrison; Harvard University Press, 91 pages, $14.95.

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What's going on here? In this age when countless academic critics do nothing *except* write about American literature in terms of race, class, and gender—and when the reading lists for introductory English courses routinely include works by Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, Maya Angelou, and Alice Walker, not to mention various slave narratives (at the university with which I am most familiar, the most widely assigned book in English and core curriculum classes, to judge by the stacks at the campus bookstore, is *The Life of Frederick Douglass*)—the reader of this book can only ask whether Morrison's problem is one of delusion or dishonesty. Certainly if any American literary critic in 1992 declared proudly that he had never read a book by a black American writer, the announcement would cause an uproar throughout the academy.

Morrison goes on to make other, equally bizarre claims—for example, that in America "American means white." To whom, other than the likes of David Duke? She maintains that "immigrant populations . . . understood their 'Americanness' as an opposition to the resident black population." One would not deny for a moment the bigotry of many European immigrants toward American blacks, but the idea that these immigrants customarily thought of themselves as Americans and of blacks as something else is, I think, mistaken; on the contrary, blacks were for most of these people a peculiarly American phenomenon. Morrison speaks of the "[e]xcising of the political from the life of the mind"—as if most academic critics today weren't busy insisting that *everything* is political. What on earth, a reader of *Playing in the Dark* keeps asking, can this woman be talking about?

For the most part, the reader never does find out what she's talking about. Like many of Joe McCarthy's famous harangues, this book is almost all assertion and no evidence: at times one wonders whether Morrison has confused reiteration with illustration. She doesn't name a single one of those "powerful literary critics" who are proud to say they've never read an "African-American text," doesn't name anyone who is engaging in "wanton, elaborate strategies" to "erase" Africanism, doesn't quote a word from any of those statements "insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity." The whole book reads not like a work of criticism but like a fundamentalist sermon or a stump speech. In place of logic, Morrison offers emotional appeals to the faithful; in place of evidence, she offers self-righteous victim rhetoric aimed at the conscience of the oppressor. The few examples she does cite are atypical and unconvincing. For instance, after stating in her opening essay, "Black Matters," that most literary criticism suffers from "polite repression" of race questions—from a disinclination, that is, to address the issue of race for fear of offending blacks—she suggests that when such repression is not in force, the result can be very offensive. To demonstrate this, she quotes a single sentence: "Despite the fact that he grew up largely in the south and spent some of his most fruitful years in Richmond and Baltimore, Poe has little to say about the darky." This sentence, she explains, appeared in an essay on Poe written by one Killis Campbell and published in a 1936 issue of *Studies in English*. "If it seems unfair to reach back to the thirties for samples of the kind of lapse that can occur when certain manners of polite repression are waived," Morrison says, "let me assure you that equally egregious representations of the phenomenon are still common." But she doesn't cite any.

Needless to say, the line from Campbell doesn't do anything to support Morrison's thesis about the central role of blacks in white fiction. In all of "Black Matters," in fact, she offers only one example in defense of this thesis. The work she cites is the last (and one of the two weakest) of Willa Cather's many novels, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), in which a mid-nineteenth-century Virginia slaveowner, resentful of her husband's attraction to a mulatto slave girl, encourages her randy nephew to seduce the girl, only to be foiled by her abolitionist daughter and the Underground

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Railroad. Though Morrison agrees with most critics that the book is a failure, she maintains that a ubiquitous "critical blindness" in regard to race has prevented readers from discerning the nature of its flaws. Morrison blames "the breakdown in the logic of [Cather's] plot construction" on "the powerful impact race has on narrative—and on narrative strategy." Granted, there may be some truth here: perhaps Cather had difficulty entering the minds of slaves because their lives were too foreign to her, or perhaps she let her desire to make a point about slavery overwhelm her ambition to create art.

But this isn't enough for Morrison: she's out to prove her point about white Americans' obsession with race, and she decides to do so by making a series of categorical pronouncements about Cather's motives in writing *Sapphira*. For instance, she states that Cather is meditating "on the moral equivalence of free white women and enslaved black women," and that her use of "mother-daughter pairings and relationships leads to the inescapable conclusion that Cather was dreaming and redreaming her problematic relationship with her own mother." This conclusion strikes the present reader as not so much "inescapable" as facile and undemonstrable. Morrison's approach here is representative of her entire discussion of *Sapphira*; after the hysterical build-up, one can hardly believe this is all she has to offer by way of payoff. Nor can one help wondering where she would locate the race obsession in Cather's more famous novels —say, in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, both of which concern immigrant white farm families in Nebraska.

One turns to Morrison's second essay, "Romancing the Shadow," desperate for something concrete. Morrison obliges by beginning with a quotation from Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* that is riddled with white and black images. The terror embodied in American romance, she suggests, was a terror "of human freedom," and that authors' transferral of internal conflicts about this subject "to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies . . . is a major theme of American literature." Rather than support this claim, however, she goes on to quote three pages from Bernard Bailyn's historical study *Voyagers to the West*. The excerpt quoted is a thumbnail portrait of William Dunbar, a learned young eighteenth-century Scotsman who became a Mississippi planter notable for his brutal treatment of slaves. Outrageously, Morrison proceeds to employ Dunbar as a paradigm of "the American as new, white, and male," taking for granted that Dunbar, whose psychology she confidently extrapolates from Bailyn's brief account, was typical of the white male American of his day.

For Dunbar, Morrison argues, his slaves were creatures against whose servitude he could measure his own freedom, upon whom he could project his own savagery, etc.; as she puts it, "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny." But Morrison doesn't connect Bailyn's account of Dunbar with any literary text; nor does she explain why she has chosen Dunbar, of all eighteenth-century Americans, as an archetype. To read her, one might never suspect that antebellum Mississippi planters were far from typical of white Southerners (most of whom were not slaveholders) or, in fact, of plantation owners as a whole. As with her quotation from Campbell, Morrison's main purpose here would seem to be to invoke belligerently the authority of her own victimhood.

After making a few breathless observations about *Huckleberry Finn* that don't add much to what has been written about that novel, Morrison names a few American works that close with images of whiteness: the white mountaintop in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro"; the white boat in *To Have and Have Not*; the "white frozen wastes" of ice in *Henderson the Rain King*. (Yes, one wants to add, and *The Great Gatsby* ends

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with a green light.) Morrison's conclusion: "If we follow through on the self-reflexive nature of these encounters with Africanism, it falls clear: images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say." All that this reader can say, in response to such a conclusion, is: *which* writers? Falls clear to *whom*? Morrison hasn't even begun to demonstrate any of this.

Which brings us to the book's third essay, "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks," wherein Morrison's argument revolves largely around a single line in Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*. After making a point of Hemingway's depersonalization of Wesley, the mate on Harry Morgan's boat, she quotes a sentence from Morgan's narrative: "I saw he [Wesley] had seen a patch of flying fish burst out ahead." Morrison finds this sentence "strangely awkward, oddly constructed," and says:

> A better, certainly more graceful choice would be to have the black man cry out at the sighting. But the logic of the narrative's discrimination prevents a verbal initiative of importance to Harry's business to come from this nameless, sexless, nationless Africanist presence. It is the powerful one, the authoritative one, who sees. The power of looking is Harry's; the passive powerlessness is the black man's, though he himself does not speak of it. Silencing him, refusing him the opportunity of one important word, forces the author to abandon his search for transparency in the narrative act and to set up a curiously silent mate-captain relationship.

First, is *any* silence in Hemingway "curious"? Second, is Hemingway's sentence so awkward? (This reader doesn't find it so.) Third, doesn't Hemingway accord Wesley an important role in the scene just by having him, and not Harry, spot the fish first? To judge by the attention Morrison accords it, this line from *To Have and Have Not* would appear to be the central example in American literature of how "[a]ll of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes." Yet she doesn't persuade us that the line contains anything "disrupting."

Some longtime readers of Morrison might consider her stultifying academic manner in *Playing in the Dark* uncharacteristic. To this reader, however, the Morrison of these essays seems perfectly consistent with the Morrison of her less fastidious fiction: the tone here is just as portentous, the style equally gushy and imprecise, the theme no less sensational. Morrison doesn't flinch from employing the dreariest academic jargon of the day, going in for such locutions as "contestatory," "inscribe," and "reification," and describing contemporary blacks as "the bound and unfree, the economically oppressed, the marginalized, the silenced." "Here in that nexus," reads a representative passage,

> with its particular formulations, and in the absence of real knowledge or open-minded inquiry about Africans and African-Americans, under the pressures of ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation, an American brand of Africanism emerged: strongly urged, thoroughly serviceable, companionably ego-reinforcing, and pervasive. For excellent reasons of state—because European sources of cultural hegemony were dispersed but not yet valorized in the new country—the process of organizing American coherence through a distancing Africanism became the operative mode of a new cultural hegemony.

By employing such tired language, Morrison makes one thing clear: she has absolutely nothing original to say. She would have one believe that she is firing the first shot in a critical revolution, but the war was over long before she started, and all she's doing here is pledging allegiance to the New Order. Her book regurgitates the most extreme race-centered arguments that have already been made (or—as she might put it

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—"made and made and made again") by hundreds of Black Studies professors in thousands of books, articles, and monographs. Like her novels, *Playing in the Dark* reminds us time and again that Morrison's cardinal weakness as an artist resides in her insistence upon seeing self and other not in individual but in racial—and, secondarily, in sexual—terms: blacks (or, sometimes, black women) are *us*, whites (or, sometimes, white men) are *them*. Morrison's characters are not necessarily conventional stereotypes, but they are, more often than not, projections of her long-settled ideas about the demographic categories to which they belong. Her treatment of Dunbar shows that, for her, what's true of the individual must in some way be true of the group (a fact which may well help to explain why she so often provides only one example to demonstrate a thesis). That blacks have figured importantly in American literature is undeniable; but that's not enough for Morrison. She won't have anything less than race as *the* theme of American literature, of blacks as *the* secret obsession of white America, of racism as *the* ultimate truth of every white American soul.

Yet the realities of race relations are extraordinarily complex; and universal human truths (notwithstanding the scorn Morrison expresses in these pages for the idea of "universal truth") *do* transcend local and racial ones. The categories so dear to a writer like Morrison have a funny way of refusing to be reconciled with certain historical facts—for instance, that many African tribesmen sold fellow blacks into slavery, that many white American men gave their lives in the Civil War to free black slaves, and that race is only one of many excuses people have used over the years to abuse one another or to claim victim status. Morrison never quite faces up to the fact that *homo sapiens*, of whatever skin color, can be a pretty odious creature, and that race, while far from a meaningless component of human identity, is not absolutely determining either, and, while not irrelevant to literary art, should not be allowed by any author to obscure his or her sense of the uniqueness of the human individual—a concept, by the way, for which Morrison expresses nothing but contempt.

In Morrison's view, of course, even to say such things about race and literature is racist. "The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse," she says—by which one can only assume she means the act of appraising literary works without regard to the race of their authors or characters—"is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand." Where in heaven's name did this image come from? To what might it conceivably be referring? And what does it accomplish, except to summon up an ugly image of white-on-black violence—an image that, promulgated by a woman of color, comes off as black-on-white aggression? To read these words is to have one's breath taken away by the chilling enmity behind them. Talk about rhetorical acid! One cannot help thinking of the National Book Award judges whose failure, in 1988, to vote a prize to *Beloved* was condemned by a number of Morrison's prominent black partisans as racist. Some weeks later, the Pulitzer went to *Beloved*. How, one wonders, would Morrison characterize that incident? Was the NBA jury truly racist? Were her supporters agitating unfairly? Who, in her view, was pouring rhetorical acid?

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Fire & ice: Aulis Sallinen's "Kullervo"

by John Simon

If I were rating the national epics of the world, Finland's *Kalevala* would not be near the top of my list. It has too many inconsistencies, does not form a consecutive whole, and features too much shamanistic magic—something that, for me, dehumanizes the story. And, as far as I can tell from consulting a couple of translations, it is not all that poetic either.

Elias Lönnrot, a scholar who walked about collecting the ancient material, pared it down very considerably and fairly freely imposed his shaping hand on it. Out of some hundred thousand verses, he arrived at twelve thousand, ordered into thirty-two runes (cantos) for the first edition of 1835; the second, definitive one of 1849 comprises twenty-three thousand verses in fifty runes. They are in trochaic tetrameter, a measure well suited to the Finnish language, which accentuates the first syllables of words. I know the epic from Anton Schiefner's German translation, updated and annotated by Martin Buber (second, improved edition, 1921). The work has its incidental felicities, but also much dross; if Homer is your touchstone, the *Kalevala* will leave you as cold as a Finnish winter.

Still, it is the Finnish national epic and has inspired much of Finland's art, most notably the tone poems of Sibelius. Now it is also the source of a new opera, *Kullervo*, by Aulis Sallinen, who strikes me as the most important living operatic composer, and one of the finest in the many other musical genres he practices. His first opera, *The Horseman*, did not materialize until Sallinen was forty, in 1975; I know it only from the original-cast recording. His second, and thus far his masterpiece, *The Red Line* (1978), I caught when the Finnish National Opera presented it at the Met in 1983; the third, *The King Goes Forth to France*, I have not seen or heard; it has not yet been recorded, though it was mounted, unsuccessfully, in Santa Fe in 1986. *Kullervo*, finished in 1988, was meant to open the new opera house in Helsinki, whose completion being long delayed, the work was given a studio recording[1] and offered to another opera house for a world première. Out of several competitors, Los Angeles was chosen. The L.A. Music Center Opera offered four performances starting February 25, with essentially the same forces as on the recording, most of whom will, presumably, appear in the postponed Finnish première.

Sallinen is lucky to have a group of highly talented artists assisting him, many of whom he has worked with over and over. The stage director, Kalle Holmberg, directed all four Sallinen premières; Ulf Söderblom, the conductor, led the orchestra for *The Horseman* as well. At the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, home of the Oscars, the musicians were the augmented Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, which blended splendidly with the Finnish singers and conductor.

1 Ondine, ODE 780-3T.

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Flying to Los Angeles, I recollected my first encounter with Sallinen's music at the second and last performance of *The Red Line*, during the Finns' four-day visit to the Metropolitan in 1983. The night before, Joonas Kokonnen's *The Last Temptations* had left me respectfully unimpressed. Now I was witnessing an operatic performance at which everything worked: orchestra and conductor, singing and acting (even the very looks of the cast), stage direction and set design, costumes and lighting, and, above all, libretto and music. Never before or since have I experienced such perfection in an opera house; my feelings were shared by the half dozen friends I had enticed into coming along.

Was *Kullervo* going to be an encore of the same enchantment? Here as in *The Red Line*, though not in his other two operas, Sallinen was his own librettist, though here too basing his work on other people's stories. I tried to formulate for myself what it is that draws me so to Sallinen's music: I have acquired all three of the operas and everything else available on CD. This includes two releases on the BIS label and three on Finlandia; also a further Finlandia item[2] featuring, besides works by Hindemith and Sallinen's teacher, Aarre Merikanto, Sallinen's orchestral version of the *Four Dream Songs* (the soprano is the marvelous Karita Mattila; the conductor, Ulf Söderblom). Anyone wishing to sample Sallinen without springing for a two- or three-CD set might start with BIS CD-41, a seventy-five-minute cross section through Sallinen's oeuvre, or with Finlandia FACD 346, whose offerings include the masterly Cello Concerto of 1977 and the ravishing Fourth Symphony of 1979.

A work such as that symphony, or the Sinfonia III on the BIS disk I cited, holds the key to Sallinen's contribution to modern music as of now—for the composer, at age fifty-six, is still changing and developing. But how to put this into words? There are two ways of writing about music, neither of them wholly satisfactory. There is the musicologist's way, which analyzes the musical structure but says very little to the lay music lover, and not all that much more to the expert. And there is the amateur's way, which tries to render the feelings the music evokes or elicits but is finally irrelevant to the ineffable quiddity that strikes every listener differently.

To advert specifically to Sallinen, what are we to make of the following? In the brochure that comes with the LP version of *The Red Line*[3] but not with the CD, we read in an essay by Ilkka Oramo: "Rhythm is probably the one musical element that is immediately the least prominent in Sallinen's music." Yet when we turn to an essay by Pekka Hako in the Los Angeles program booklet for *Kullervo*, we are told about how "characteristic is an energetic rhythmic element." Maybe this is not entirely contradictory; after all, Oramo says merely that rhythm is not *immediately* prominent in Sallinen. But what does that mean? That with repeated listening rhythm becomes more and more prominent? That we are dealing with a delayed-reaction or time-bomb rhythm that ticks away inconspicuously until on, say, fifth hearing it explodes?

There is no wholly persuasive way of conveying music in words because music is precisely a way of saying things *without* words. To verbalize the nonverbal is a form of betrayal. Yet we do try, because we are verbal creatures, who attempt to make sense of life by verbalizing it. Can we put into words what lovemaking feels like? Can we verbalize what we ate at a four-star restaurant? No, but we try to. Because in our very failure to express the essence, we nevertheless come closer to an elusive, subjective understanding. If, for example, I say that the first movement of Sallinen's Fourth Symphony, marked *andante poco giocoso*, sounds like a collaboration between the jaunty young Prokofiev and the sardonic late Shostakovich, I have said, frankly, very little. But I am proud even of that little, because, yes, there is a cer-

2 FACD 359.

3 Finlandia FA 102.

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tain jaunty playfulness *à la Chout* combining here with the acerbity of a post-Zhdanovian Shostakovich scherzo. Still, whom does my infinitesimal insight benefit? Not someone seeking unalterable truth, but perhaps someone whose curiosity is piqued by the promise of Prokofievian piquancy further marinated in Shostakovich spices. Perhaps even by calling attention to that *poco giocoso*, I can convey a sense of funny but not that damned funny—or laughter out of the wrong side of the mouth.

Well, let me take a deep breath and try to characterize the feel of Sallinen. If I were to say "burning ice," you would sneer, "Of course *ice*; he is Nordic, after all. But who wants freezing music? So, then, diplomatically, *burning* ice." Not so fast, please. There is something about Sallinen's basic manner that everyone seems to agree on: he writes coloristic music. For example, he loves all kinds of tintinnabulation: the actual or simulated sound of the glockenspiel, cembalo, celesta, marimba, or triangle is very Sallinenish (there is one American composer who thus reminds me of him: Ellen Taaffe Zwilich). It is the sound of sleigh bells, church bells in wintry air, blasts of boreal warning. The effect is chilling, but also bracing.

Remember: wind, when it hits your face, stings, burns. I hear gusts, fits and starts, in Sallinen, but also the joy of human sounds seeming nearer and clearer on an ice-capped winter day, not just gliding into but also tingling in the ear. At other times, though, there is the softpedaling of snow, the deadening of all sound in a blanket of cotton wool. Then, perhaps, a distant sound out of one isolated section of the orchestra, either evaporating before our very ears or building into the manic eruption of pent-up emotions, as in that pair of crescendos on the single note B, from *pppp* to *fff*, during the last scene change in *Wozzeck*. But almost always we return to the sound of various-sized icicles being banged together tunefully, dueling stalagmites and stalactites.

There are ostinatos out of which suddenly springs a melody of unhoped-for sweetness, only to be lopped off suddenly like a frostbitten finger. There are color patches—mosaics, Sallinen has called them—music made of minute tesserae of brightly contrasting hues that gradually coalesce into a picture. Sallinen himself has stressed that "this world of music is first and foremost visual," Oramo reminds us; "the concept of form lives in his imagination as the contour of a landscape or a topographic map."

Kullervo is based on the *Kalevala*, which Sallinen quoted already in *The Horseman*. And even more on an 1864 play by Aleksis Kivi, the father of Finnish literature, a revival of which Sallinen saw shortly before starting work on his new opera. I know nothing about Kivi's piece of "Romantic realism," untranslated into English, but gather that it, like the epic, lacks the love theme Sallinen invented for his operatic treatment. In *The Los Angeles Times*, Martin Bernheimer complained about Sallinen's "rather static libretto," with "most of the action offstage." And he went on to note regretfully that "Kalle Holmberg's staging scheme . . . almost reduced the drama to oratorio." Conversely, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jörg von Uthmann regretted that this oratorio aspect was not sufficiently exploited. "Instead of aiming visually, too, for pure abstraction, Holmberg and his set designer Måns Hedström tried to loosen up the static happening with expressionistic tricks. The chorus, burdened with the weight of the narration, would rush on simultaneously through several doors, wander aimlessly across the stage, crowd together anxiously or extend arms to ward off a sudden, threatening light from above. The intention was clear: the excited to and fro was supposed to bring the saga humanly closer. It didn't. On the contrary, it lessened the archaic force." Is there too much action or not enough? The real problem, I think, is that the epic plot scatters the action across too broad a canvas, while the staging, perhaps inevitably, confines that action in too narrow confines.

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What is this plot? It is the story of Kullervo, whom the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* identifies as "the spirit of evil," though that is an oversimplification. The son of the mighty Kalervo, who was always engaged in fraternal skirmishing with his brother Unto, Kullervo, already as a baby, performed Herculean feats, albeit of a destructive nature. Eventually, Unto got the better of Kalervo, wreaking destruction on him, his family, and his house by sword and fire, sparing only Kullervo. In Holmberg's stylized staging, this is represented by the crumpling and burning of papers in a brazier. Unto's wife argues that Kullervo must die too, but Unto prefers to make him one of his slaves. When he proves unruly, Unto sells him cheap to the smith Ilmarinen, whose herdsman he becomes. The Smith's Young Wife (as she is identified in the opera) falls for him; he has an abortive sexual encounter with her. (Recall that I am following Sallinen, who follows and considerably rewrites Kivi, who followed and considerably rewrote the *Kalevala*, so that the opera is at two removes from the epic. Moreover, as Keith Bosley, the most recent translator of the *Kalevala*, points out, "Kullervo, more than any other figure in the epic, [is] largely Lönnrot's creation.")

The Smith's Young Wife has no name; the *Kalevala* does not especially dignify women. Anyway, making bread for the shepherd's lunch, she bakes a stone into it. In the epic, where there is no sex between the woman and Kullervo, this is an act of sheer meanness; in Sallinen, it is a sexual invitation: the stone symbolizes the young man's hardness, which the woman longs to feel inside her. But Kullervo breaks his knife, his only bequest from his father, on that stone. In revenge, he lets bears and wolves kill Ilmarinen's sheep, and, in the epic, herds the predators back to the smith's house, where they tear apart the wife, epically stupid enough to mistake the wild beasts for livestock. In the opera, Kullervo, furious because of his damaged knife, his sexual failure with the woman, her renewed temptings and taunts, kills her with the truncated blade.

Meanwhile he has become friends with a gentle fellow slave, Kimmo (not in the *Kalevala*), on whom he sometimes vents his fury. Kimmo, however, somehow discovers Kullervo's parents living in distant exile, having inexplicably survived Unto's attack. This comes straight out of the epic, and represents, I assume, Lönnrot's clumsiness in patching together divergent stories. In any case, they live in a lonely cottage with two daughters, one of whom—Ainikki, the pretty one (though in the epic she, too, is nameless)—has wandered off into the woods and not been heard from again.

Kimmo was going to prepare and oversee the coming together of Kullervo and his folks, but he is late getting there, the reunion misfires, and Kimmo blames himself to the point of eventually losing his mind. The reunion is indeed thorny: the Mother (no name) lovingly recognizes her boy; the remaining Sister (no name) accepts him resentfully; Kalervo, though he recognizes the broken knife, never quite acknowledges his unloved son. Kullervo, guilt-ridden over the murder of the Smith's Young Wife (staged in the opera as the stripping-off of her black outer garments, revealing her in a blood-red shift, in which, spread-eagled against a wall, she slowly crumbles), proves somber company at home. To get rid of this nuisance, his father sends him on errands. It is thus that a fateful incident, also present in the *Kalevala*, takes place.

Riding through the forest, he encounters a pretty girl whom he gives a ride to. Soon *she* is giving him a different kind of ride. After several days' dallying, the pair get to talking and discover they are siblings. Distraught, Ainikki drowns herself in a torrent, and Kullervo returns home in pain. Though Holmberg stages this incident in symbolic pantomime, it is present in the libretto only in the ballad sung by a blind itinerant bard whom Kimmo has found and brought along. (Kimmo does get around for a slave.) The *laulaja* (Finnish for bard) is turned by Sallinen into a pop singer who performs with a microphone; he is sung effectively by an actual pop singer, Vesa-Matti Loiri.

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Kullervo's mother lovingly urges her destructive son to go far away and live in repentant solitude. His father curses him, his sister execrates him, only his mother, in what is probably the most beautiful music in the opera, declares her unswerving love. Sallinen has said that "this story would not be worth telling if it did not have one song above all others. This is the theme of Kullervo's Mother, woven in bright golden thread." Kullervo sets out on a final journey to avenge the evil Unto has done unto his family. He joins up with three ferocious companions and the sneaky, sniveling Hunter, who made his first baleful appearance at Ilmainen's just before Kullervo murdered the Smith's Young Wife. With the Hunter leading them, Kullervo and his companions overpower Unto and his kith and kin; there is murder, rape, and pillage, and the place is burned down.

The revenge, fire for fire, is complete. Holmberg stylizes this devastation into a systematic dismantling of stacked-up blocks of wood. Kullervo then seeks out his by now totally demented—but quietly and sweetly so—friend Kimmo for the last time. Kimmo is playing with a toy horse and mistakes Kullervo, whom he has been longing for, for Jesus Christ. This closing scene, beautifully written and composed, is one long, melting pianissimo. Then Kullervo goes to die: "The fire will take me, it is cool, it is gentle./ Am I afraid of death?/ It cannot be worse than life./ That is how the world treated me." The chorus sings wordlessly and mournfully; over the vocalise we hear the Mother's voice calling "Kullervo!"

The story of Kullervo is, according to the *Kalevala*, which is sometimes quoted verbatim in the libretto, a tale of faulty child-rearing. Because Unto and his wife were cruel or negligent, Kullervo grew up brutal and ended badly. But it should be evident even from my summary that the parabolic, pedagogic, or propaedeutic value of the tale is negligible, and its appropriateness for an operatic libretto scarcely greater. But good, strong librettos are rare; their number falls somewhere between hen's teeth and Great American Novels. Most operas survive, if they do, despite their librettos, and that goes for Wagner, too, with whose *Walküre* and *Parsifal* the libretto of *Kullervo* may have a distant kinship.

Hedström's permanent set consists of the ramparts of a fortification, comprising the jagged back wall of the stage zigzagging irregularly, and two side walls more or less cutting off the wings. It is dark gray with three-dimensional striations suggestive of logs, and has eight burnt-orange-colored double doors to the rear and along the sides, the whole thing not unlike the façade of a modern summer theater in a rustic setting. The wall on stage right features a number of small, serried, square windows; stage left there is one larger one. At intervals, beams of light pour from them. Altogether, Claude Naville provides eye-and-breath-catching, nonrealistic lighting. Sometimes it seems to constitute solid building blocks of light, each of a different color, forming a parti-colored edifice of light; sometimes it descends as a translucent but substantial shower curtain bisecting the stage laterally. It is a defiant presence, a part of the unreal, saga atmosphere.

Six steps lead down toward the front of the stage in the shape of an angular U, open toward the audience. Into this forestage, Måns Hedström has placed, in the first act, a small log cabin, which Uthmann perceives jokily as a sauna; Bruce Beresford, the film and opera director, as an Australian-style outhouse. It stands for various dwellings and is overworked as well as puny. But, at that, it is still better than what replaces it in the second act: a mini-stage, complete with red curtains, which serves well for the bard's performance, but soon becomes an encumbrance. Nevertheless, there is austere beauty in the scenic design even where its aptness is questionable. The costumes, by Pekka Ojamaa, are modern for the chorus (everything from military uniforms, through raincoats, to miniskirts) and antique but unspecific for the principals. Kullervo always

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appears in simple herdsman's garb; the chieftains (Kalervo, Unto) wear impressive robes; their consorts sport gowns that suggest Greek mythology crossed with Nordic sagas.

The singing actors were remarkable. Jorma Hyninnen, the paradigmatic Sallinen protagonist, lent his highly flexible baritone, heroic features, and masculinely elegant presence to a superbly virile Kullervo, a role that called for some athleticism, especially in repeated scalings of a kind of fire escape lodged in a cranny of the fortress's walls. He was impeccably matched by the limpid tenor of Jorma Silvasti as Kimmo. A very tall man with an innocent, boyish face, Silvasti also had the needed sweetness. The soprano Eeva-Liisa Saarinen was an electrifying Mother: regal in her big scene, yet also maternal and moving. Anna-Lise Jakobsson was sensual of voice and bearing as the Smith's Young Wife. The one cast member not on the recording, the bass Martti Wallén, held his own against Martti Salminen, whom he replaced, which is high praise indeed. Solid work, both vocally and histrionically, was contributed by the rest, not least by the chorus.

The 156 minutes of music, divided in the text into three acts, were presented as two. The music does have its occasional longueurs—as what lengthy opera does not? —especially in Act II. The arioso mode in which, like all contemporary opera composers, Sallinen writes for the voice does yield to true aria at the climaxes, and the repeated figures in the orchestra know when to rouse themselves into pure melody. After all, Sallinen has always aimed to be an accessible, even popular, composer, as when he lets the folk song dominate *Some Aspects of Peltoniemi Hintrik's Funeral March* or introduces a crowd-pleasing tango into the *Nocturnal Dances of Don Juanquixote*. So the *laulaja*'s ballad, probably also based on Finnish folk music, evokes memories of Greek bouzouki and North African rheitas.

Still, the music is always unmistakably Nordic, but not so much in the manner of Sibelius, whose own Kullervo Symphony appeared exactly a century ago, as in that of Vaughan Williams's Seventh Symphony, which was originally the film score for *Scott of the Antarctic*. I could frequently hear in it life and death in the polar regions, though minus Vaughan Williams's penguins.

This music never wears its emotions on the sleeve. They are held back, understated, slightly reserved even in moments of potentially unrestrained passion. The sound is often mysterious, doubled, as it were, by its own echo, as if reaching us from a deep cave, perhaps (to quote Martha Graham) the cave of the heart. Besides the microphone for the *laulaja*, Sallinen uses other conspicuously modernistic devices, though not his early serialism, which he has happily long since abandoned. There is, however, prerecorded *Sprechgesang*, suggesting the promptings of the unconscious; also a synthesizer, maybe to convey the strangeness of the psyche.

There is much repetition in the music, but not like that of the minimalists. Rather, the mastery of instrumental color, faintly reminiscent of Janáček, keeps us in suspense with its subtle modifications. Pedal points loom large: sustained notes underscore entire scenes. There is something unsettling about those orchestral ostinatos, often foreboding, sometimes forbidding. Yet the promise of melody hovers over the spectral landscape, making good with a sort of resigned cantilena, wistfully enveloping us before it fades with the last hope of happiness.

Kullervo is powerful, though not so moving, so ungainsayable as *The Red Line*. Hear it for yourself: the three-disc recording is magnificent. Listen to it, following Erkki Arni's first-rate translation in the booklet, which was expertly converted into surtitles in Los Angeles. Repeat this procedure once or twice before passing judgment. I'd be surprised if you were to consider the experience unrewarding.

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The "politics" of Anthony Powell

by Terry Teachout

In one sense Naipaul could hardly be less "committed" (to use an old-fashioned term); in another his political interests, in the deeper meaning of the phrase, are intensely alive.
—Anthony Powell, *The Strangers All Are Gone*

The danger of attempting a *tour de force* is that the rest of your output may vanish in its long shadow. Anthony Powell has written half a dozen shortish novels, a four-volume memoir, a very good biography of John Aubrey, and hundreds of book reviews and essays, but he is chiefly known, and will no doubt continue to be known, for his twelve-volume *roman fleuve*, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. For better or worse, Powell will always suffer the consequences of having sought to follow in the footsteps of Marcel Proust.

Interestingly, some of Powell's greatest admirers, most notably Philip Larkin, seem to have felt it for the worse that Powell's reputation should have come to rest on *A Dance to the Music of Time*. And while this ambitious effort has not lacked for prestigious fans, there is a distinct whiff of disappointment in many critical appraisals of *Dance*. Most of the summary reviews that appeared in the wake of the 1975 publication of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, the final installment of *Dance*, fit into one of two categories. Some reviewers praised *Dance* unstintingly, but in terms suggesting that they found it appealing mainly as an exercise in upper-class nostalgia, a *triple sec Brideshead Revisited*. (One suspects that they would just as soon have waited for the *Masterpiece Theatre* version.) Others attacked Powell for being variously insensitive to their preferred critical agendas: too political, not political enough, overly interested in class, insufficiently interested in sexual intercourse—the list drones on.

It is quite true that there is a good deal more to Anthony Powell than *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Powell's earlier novels are of high quality, while his memoir, *To Keep the Ball Rolling*, is both immensely readable and of considerable historical interest. Moreover, Powell's latest book, a hefty new collection of occasional pieces called *Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers, 1946-1989*, is one of the most satisfyingly professional volumes of literary journalism to appear in recent years. [1] His cool critical judgments are always worth reading for their own sake as well as for the autobiographical light they shed. Powell is also an accomplished parodist, and *Miscellaneous Verdicts* contains several uproarious guyings of celebrated contemporaries, including a Cyril Connolly parody as unsparing as Connolly's own "Bond Strikes Camp" or "Told in Gath."

But most of Powell's hostile critics do not appear to be interested in the rest of his output. Instead, their dislike of *Dance* appears

1 *Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers, 1946-1989*, by Anthony Powell; University of Chicago Press, 501 pages, $32.

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to be motivated at least in part by what they understand to be Powell's political attitudes, though few of them have sought to explore the "politics" of *Dance* in any thoroughgoing way. In progressive-minded literary circles, one need merely assert that Anthony Powell is (1) conservative and (2) snobbish in order to establish that he is an enemy of right-thinking types everywhere. Yet this line of attack, banal as it is, does point toward an important truth: *A Dance to the Music of Time* is, in a special sense, a profoundly "political" novel. That sense is the one Powell has in mind when, speaking of V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* in his memoirs, he describes Naipaul as an "uncommitted" author whose political interests are nonetheless "intensely alive."

This aspect of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is obscured by the way in which Powell tells his story. Any discussion of *Dance* must begin with the familiar quip that it is "Proust Englished by Wodehouse." Like most such remarks, this one, while suggestive, is more clever than true. To be sure, Powell's techniques are deliberately Proustian. *Dance* covers a huge canvas—it begins in 1921 and ends in 1971. The metaphor is made more appropriate by the opening tableau of the first installment of *Dance*, *A Question of Upbringing*, with its allusion to Nicolas Poussin's painting *A Dance to the Music of Time*, which is echoed, Proust-like, at novel's end: "The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure . . . breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance."

But to call *Dance* "Proustian" is to ignore its tone, which is witty, astringent, and not at all confiding. Though we learn much about Nicholas Jenkins, Powell's narrator, in the course of the novel, he is not the hero, merely a civilized *compère* of wide acquaintance whose searching gaze is but rarely fixed on his own soul. And funny as *Dance* so frequently is, it is far from being "Wodehousean," not least because Powell steers clear of two important elements of the traditional comic novel: its "classical" reliance on conventional plot devices and stock characters. *A Dance to the Music of Time* contains no Lucky Jim Dixon who gets the girl and rings down the curtain with a heartwarming bang. Indeed, those characters in *Dance* who do achieve success tend more often than not to do so by blackguarding their friends. And Nick Jenkins almost always reserves judgment in such cases, preferring simply to note with dry, tolerant wit the moral shortcomings and inconsistencies of his acquaintances.

At first glance, Powell's taste for comedy, often of the broadest kind, may seem at odds with the avowed purpose of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, which is nothing if not grandiose. "After the war," he recalled in 1961, "when I came out of the Army and returned to the writing of novels, I decided that the thing to do was to produce a really large work about all the things I was interested in—the whole of one's life, in fact." But the fact that Powell chose to pursue so serious a literary undertaking in so seemingly lighthearted a manner reflects his belief that comedy is the best way to convey the complexities of life as it is lived. As Nick Jenkins explains:

> It is not easy—perhaps not even desirable—to judge other people by a consistent standard. Conduct obnoxious, even unbearable, in one person may be readily tolerated in another; apparently indispensable principles of behaviour are in practice relaxed—not always with impunity—in the interests of those whose nature seems to demand an exceptional measure. That is one of the difficulties of committing human action to paper, a perplexity that really justifies the alternations of comedy with tragedy in Shakespearean drama. . . . On the stage, however, masks are assumed with some regard to procedure: in everyday life, the participants act their parts without consideration either for suitability of scene or for the words spoken by the rest of the cast: the result

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> is a general tendency for things to be brought to the level of farce even when the theme is serious enough.

Other customary tokens of "seriousness" absent from Powell's canvas turn out on closer inspection to have been omitted intentionally. Religion, for instance, is simply not a factor in *Dance* (though Nick Jenkins, like his creator, is fascinated by spiritualism), not only because Powell appears not to be interested in religious belief as a fictional subject but because he is a quintessential English empiricist, suspicious by nature of all systems of belief. "I would be hard put," Powell said in 1963, "to deny that theorists are distasteful to me. People get me down who claim, you know, to have the answer to life." In any event, the place of religion is usurped in *A Dance to the Music of Time* by its twentieth-century counterpart: ideology.

The "first movement" (to use Powell's term) of *Dance*, comprising *A Question of Upbringing*, *A Buyer's Market*, and *The Acceptance World*, is set in London in the Twenties, a decade in which politics remained firmly in the background of upper-middle-class English life. Not that Powell had much use for the reigning notions of the period, as one of his characters acidly suggests later on in the novel: "Every house stuffed with Moderns from cellar to garret. High-pitched voices adumbrating absolute values, rational states of mind, intellectual integrity, civilized personal relationships, significant form . . . the Fitzroy Street Barbera is uncorked. *Le Sacre du Printemps* turned on, a hand slides up a leg. . . . All are at one now, values and lovers." But the self-conscious aestheticism of the Twenties soon gave way to the left-wing politics of the Thirties and after, a change of direction reflected in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. In *Dance*, any character who expresses a consuming interest in politics is eventually revealed to be either a boob or a scoundrel, and most of Powell's blackest scoundrels, as it happens, are men of the Left. Not all of *Dance*'s "politicians," of course, are politicians. Some are intellectuals, some artists. But all share one defining trait: the will to power.

Powell views this trait with the utmost suspicion, especially when it surfaces in an artist. For Nick Jenkins, "the arts themselves . . . by their ultimately sensual essence, are, in the long run, inimical to those who pursue power for its own sake. Conversely, the artist who traffics in power does so, if not necessarily disastrously, at least at considerable risk." On this point, Jenkins and his creator are in firm agreement. A regular attendee of the "fascist lunches" held in the Sixties by Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, and Tibor Szamuely, Powell had nothing but contempt for the fashionable leftism of his politically minded contemporaries, which he dismissed as "surely the true 'Treason of the Intellectuals,' who, after all, had much opportunity to learn then, as later, of the methods of a Communist regime."

Powell seems to regard leftism less as a genuine conviction than as an outward manifestation of the will to power of those who espouse it. This is a central theme of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, and it is embodied most fully in the person of Kenneth Widmerpool, the novel's best-known character. For Nick Jenkins, Widmerpool is "one of those symbolic figures, of whom most people possess at least one example, if not more, round whom the past and the future have a way of assembling . . . an archetypal figure, one of those fabulous monsters that haunt the recesses of the individual imagination." Unpopular at Eton, unlucky in love, physically clumsy, and pompous in speech, Widmerpool is all but impossible to take seriously. "And yet," Jenkins reflects, "like the phoenix, he rose habitually . . . from the ashes of his own humiliation." Indeed, he becomes a successful businessman, rises to the rank of colonel during World War II, is elected to the House of Commons and subsequently named a life peer.

It is a stroke of something like genius that *Dance*'s principal symbol of the will to power should be a grotesquely comic character. But Nick Jenkins gradually realizes that

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other people take Widmerpool quite seriously, and he comes in time to understand that the engine of Widmerpool's success is "the severe rule of ambition that he had from the beginning imposed upon himself: the determination that existence must be governed by the will."

Like most of *Dance*'s power-seekers, Widmerpool is a man of the Left, but he is far more "committed" than any other character. He shows his true colors in his reaction to the Katyn massacre of 1940 in which fifteen thousand Polish officers were murdered on Stalin's orders: "In any case, whatever materializes, even if it does transpire—which I sincerely trust it will not—that the Russians behaved in such a very regrettable manner, how can this country possibly raise official objections, in the interests of a few thousand Polish exiles, who, however worthy their cause, cannot properly handle their diplomatic relations, even with fellow Slavs. . . . How, as I say, can we approach our second most powerful Ally about something which, if a fact, cannot be put right, and is almost certainly, from what one knows of them, the consequence of administrative inadequacy, rather than willful indifference to human life and the dictates of compassion?" Such brutality (and so flawless a command of bureaucratic jargon) could hardly have failed to win Widmerpool influential friends on the British left, and when he enters the House of Commons after the war, it is, not surprisingly, as a Labour MP.

Universally acknowledged as a fellow traveler, Widmerpool turns out in fact to be a KGB asset. "Books" Bagshaw, a secondary character based on Malcolm Muggeridge, offers this explanation of Widmerpool's willingness to spy for the Russians: "Apart from anything else, it's one of those secret pleasures, like drawing a moustache on the face of a pretty girl on a poster, spitting over the stairs—you know, from a great height on to the people below. You see several heads, possibly a bald one. They don't know where the saliva comes from. It gives an enormous sense of power. . . . Think of the same sort of fun when you're an MP, or respected civil servant, giving the whole show away on the quiet, when everybody thinks you're a pillar of society." Finding Bagshaw's explanation not quite adequate, Jenkins speculates that Widmerpool had "not only desire to reshape the world according to some doctrinaire pattern, but also to be revenged on a world that had found himself insufficiently splendid in doing so."

Widmerpool's later years, with which the last movement of *Dance* is largely concerned, are a long diminuendo of disaster. He marries a frigid, sexually predatory woman named Pamela Flitton who cuckolds him at every opportunity. After Pamela commits suicide, he drops out of sight, having barely escaped prosecution on charges of espionage. ("People say he was framed by the CIA," one character remarks. "The CIA may have fixed his wife's death too.") He moves to the United States in the early Sixties and becomes involved with the antiwar movement, returning to England to write a book called *Pogrom of Youth* and join a religious cult. "I take pride," he announces, "in ridiculing what is—or rather was—absurdly called honour, respectability, law, order, obedience, custom, rule, hierarchy, precept, regulation, all that is insidiously imposed by the morally, ideologically, and spiritually naked, and politically bankrupt, on those they have oppressed and do oppress." But Widmerpool's conversion turns out to be just another power grab, though a lunatic one: he aspires to becoming a messiah. Instead, he dies of a heart attack while running naked through the woods as part of a bizarre sexual ritual.

Toward the end of *Dance*, an acquaintance of Widmerpool's calls him a "humbug." "I'm speaking," she explains, "of making claims to a degree of virtue, purity, anything you like to call it—morals, politics, the arts, any field you prefer—which the person concerned neither possesses, nor is seriously attempting to attain. They just flatter themselves they are like that." But this verdict, true as far as it goes, overlooks Widmer-

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pool's gravest offense: he seeks to wield power over others. (At one point, he even confesses to Nick Jenkins his hopelessly reactionary desire to become a colonial governor.) For Anthony Powell, power-seeking is the deadliest sin, whether in public or private life. Many of Powell's characters, particularly his women, view love as merely another arena of "power politics," and they are portrayed in an equally scathing manner. Jenkins himself falls victim to one power-hungry woman, Jean Duport, who eventually ends up married to a South American dictator, and Pamela Flitton, the death-haunted instrument of Widmerpool's moral destruction, is drawn with special savagery:

> Pamela Flitton gave the impression of being thoroughly vicious, using the word not so much in the moral sense, but as one might speak of a horse—more specifically, a mare. . . . She appeared, for example, scarcely at all interested in looks or money, rank or youth, as such; just as happy deranging the modest home life of a middle-aged air-raid warden, as compromising the commission of a rich and handsome Guards ensign recently left school. In fact, she seemed to prefer "older men" on the whole, possibly because of their potentiality for deeper suffering.

The harsh tone of this passage is typical neither of Jenkins nor of the novel as a whole. Nick Jenkins is no moralist, and the power-seekers he meets are typically made to appear ludicrous rather than evil. But evil is unmistakably present in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Widmerpool's Soviet ties stand for the totalitarian evils unleashed upon the world by public power-seekers, while the novel's private power-seekers are devastated by the sexual decadence portrayed in the second movement of *Dance*. In *At Lady Molly's*, *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, and *The Kindly Ones*, all romantic relationships are variously illicit, and marriage is a mere bagatelle. Even the famously detached Nick Jenkins becomes involved with a married woman, Jean Duport, and lives to regret it.

Evelyn Waugh, reviewing *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, felt that Powell had failed to provide the reader with sufficiently explicit moral coordinates, and that the novel suffered as a consequence:

> Mr. Powell's characters . . . are married and fretting under the restraints and disillusions of their state. What one is not told, and needs to know in order to understand them, is what they mean by marriage. None of them avows any religious belief or traditional, ethical code; they have no dynastic ambitions or family alliances or heritable properties; no expectation of life-long companionship. All believe that marriage is terminable at will; most of them marry more than once. How do they distinguish the relationship from other forms of concubinage? That they do make a distinction is apparent from the gravity with which they discuss it, but Mr. Powell gives no hint of its origin and character. . . . Mr. Powell owes us something more solid than this evasion of the novelist's duty if he expects us to sympathize with the anxieties of his creations.

Powell's purpose becomes clearer in *The Kindly Ones*. It is 1938, not long after Munich, and "the kindly ones," the angry Eumenides of Greek mythology, are preparing to sweep away everything in their path. Our knowledge of the *dégringolade* to come adds the necessary undertone of darkness to the desperate cavorting of Nick Jenkins's friends. But Powell offers no competing set of virtues to put up against the moral squalor of London in the Thirties. For him, it is enough to suggest that *something* is missing from the shiny, hectic world his characters inhabit, something without which that world cannot survive.

Here and throughout *Dance*, Powell uses Widmerpool in order to make his moral points. He is, as Pamela Flitton obligingly tells everyone she meets, sexually impotent. He creates nothing. He makes his fortune in the "acceptance world" of arbitrage. As a military bureaucrat, he will triumph not by winning battles but by "carrying meetings." All he does is seek power, and this, too, is a

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zero-sum game: what he wins, others lose, and sometimes they lose a great deal more than their money. Because Widmerpool appears so absurd, it is possible for the casual reader to forget that he is a dangerous man. (He is, for instance, personally responsible for at least two deaths.) But Anthony Powell never forgets. When the kindly ones come calling for Lord Widmerpool at *Dance*'s end, their revenge is horrible and complete.

To concentrate solely on the "political" aspect of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is to pay insufficient attention to the skill with which Powell dramatizes his moral concerns. He is interested, after all, not in ideologies but in individuals: "All human beings, driven as they are at different speeds by the same Furies, are at close range equally extraordinary." His characters are not "round" in the Forsterian sense, as Evelyn Waugh noted: "They can be observed from one position only. We cannot walk round them as statues. They present, rather, a continuous frieze in high relief, deep cut and detailed." But that high relief is sufficient to make them live in the reader's imagination. In Anthony Powell's world, a secondary character can snap to indelible life in the course of one well-honed sentence. Take, for instance, Dicky Umfraville, a genial rogue for whom Powell clearly has considerable affection: "Trim, horsey, perfectly at ease with himself, and everyone around him, he managed at the same time to suggest the proximity of an abyss of scandal and bankruptcy threatening at any moment to engulf himself, and anyone else unfortunate enough to be within his immediate vicinity when the crash came."

Unexpectedly, Powell's strength of characterization is seen at its best in his portrayal of Nick Jenkins. It is true that Jenkins is personally reticent ("Indeed, not everyone can stand the strain of gazing down too long into the personal crater, with its scene of Hieronymus Bosch activities taking place in the depths"), but he is far less of a shadow than Powell's critics tend to think. Jenkins is, in fact, a real creation, and those who regard him as little more than a cardboard mouthpiece for the Tory views of his creator ignore, among many other things, the frankness with which Powell describes Jenkins's affair with Jean Duport. One of the most powerful scenes in *Dance* occurs when Jenkins discovers, after the affair is over, that he had been sharing his beloved Jean not only with her husband but with a loathsome mutual acquaintance named Jimmy Brent:

> I thought of that grave, gothic beauty that once I had loved so much, which found fulfillment in such men. The remembered moaning in pleasure of someone once loved always haunts the memory, even when love itself is over. Perhaps, I thought, her men are gothic too, beings carved on the niches and corbels of a mediaeval cathedral to arouse at once laughter and horror. In any case, I had been one of them. If her lovers were horrifying, I too had been of their order.

A Dance to the Music of Time is no less noteworthy for its technical resourcefulness. Every installment contains a large-scale set piece staged with the theatrical flair of a French *farceur*. Every chapter is liberally salted with pseudo-aphorisms that give *Dance* a worldly, almost Maugham-like flavor: "Later in life, I learnt that many things one may require have to be weighed against one's dignity, which can be an insuperable barrier against advancement in almost any direction." And Powell uses to the fullest his gift for parody, not only in the impeccable pastiches of Pepys, Byron, and Proust which he tosses off so casually along the way but also in the wonderfully convincing voices of his characters, the left-wing ones in particular, though Powell spares neither side.[2] ("In the last resort," he has

2 An amusing glimpse of Powell's parodistic gift can be found in this 1948 entry from Malcolm Muggeridge's diaries: "Tony Powell had been reading Graham Greene's new novel *The Heart of the Matter*. . . . By way of parody he suggested *The Host for Sale* or *Brighton Made Me* in which the leading character would be a toothless Roman Cath-

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remarked, "the caricaturist is an artist to whom his own side is as funny—though perhaps not so detestable—as his opponents'.")

The parodist's eye is also at work in Powell's resourceful use of real people as models for his characters. Evelyn Waugh, one of Powell's closest friends, claimed in 1962 that the first six volumes of *Dance* contain "no character or incident 'taken from life.'" This is, I suppose, literally true, and it is a point that Powell himself went to some trouble to make in his memoirs: "The 'real person' who sets going the idea of a major 'character' in a novelist's mind always requires change, addition, modification, development, before he (or she) can acquire enough substance to exist as a convincing fictional figure." And no major character in *Dance* is based directly on any of Powell's famous writer friends. One searches in vain for literal portrayals of, say, Waugh or Graham Greene or Cyril Connolly.

But many of *Dance*'s minor characters are recognizably drawn from life. Maurice Bowra, the Oxford don whom Evelyn Waugh caricatured as Mr. Samgrass in *Brideshead Revisited*, is Sillery, the power-hungry don whose salon Nick Jenkins frequents in *A Question of Upbringing*; George Orwell is Erridge, the left-wing lord (the title is an especially nice touch) into whose eccentric family Jenkins marries; Malcolm Muggeridge, as previously mentioned, is "Books" Bagshaw; Douglas Byng, the "camp" cabaret singer of the Thirties, is Max Pilgrim. And two major characters in *Dance* are quite clearly inspired by friends of Powell's: Hugh Moreland, who is based on Constant Lambert, author of *Music Ho!*, composer of *The Rio Grande*, and first musical director of the Sadler's Wells Ballet, and X. Trapnel, who is based on the now-forgotten writer J. Maclaren-Ross, remembered by Powell as "one of the strangest figures to surface after the war."

olic priest named Father Stinky, whose hobby was to go around at night in back streets slashing at little girls with his rosary."

Powell's superb literary craftsmanship allows him to take what in other hands might simply have been a crudely didactic conception of the role of power in human relations and turn it into a convincing artistic statement. But the underlying moral purpose is always there, and is all the more compelling for having been fully dramatized. The first half of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, from *A Question of Upbringing* to *The Kindly Ones*, is as potent an indictment of the evils of power-seeking as anything to be found in modern fiction.

At this point, unfortunately, things begin to grow slack. The third movement of *Dance* is a war trilogy oddly similar in plot and tone to Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour*. (I first read *Sword of Honour* and the third movement of *Dance* at roughly the same time, and I still confuse minor characters in the two trilogies on occasion.) It is in *The Valley of Bones*, *The Soldier's Art*, and *The Military Philosophers* that one begins to wonder if the similarities between Nick Jenkins and Tony Powell are too close for comfort, if *Dance* is ceasing to be an autonomous artistic creation and turning into a mere transcript of experience.

One suspects, too, that Powell felt an overpowering obligation to deal with World War II at "appropriate" length, a suspicion confirmed in his memoirs: "I decided the war would require three volumes of narrative to cover its various aspects and their effect on the characters of the novel. Accordingly, making a rough estimate of the age I should be when the last of the war trilogy had been completed—and not wanting the engine to run down before the end of the journey—I settled at this point that *Dance* should be contained within twelve volumes." The design is a logical one, perhaps too logical to allow the *daemon* of creative fantasy free rein. Whatever the reasons, the third movement of *Dance*, though by no means without interest, is the weakest part of the novel.

Books Do Furnish a Room, the tenth volume of *Dance*, brings a welcome resurgence of

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narrative tension. Many of Powell's original characters have been killed off in the war or have simply fallen victim to advancing age. ("Such wastage among friends and acquaintances," Powell observes in his memoirs, "is one of the liabilities of middle-age.") Most of their replacements, Pamela Flitton and X. Trapnel in particular, are more than worthy of their late predecessors. But the renewed promise of *Books Do Furnish a Room* and *Temporary Kings*, its successor, is not quite realized in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, the final installment of *Dance*. The death of Widmerpool is a bit too good to be true, and the Proustian mechanics of the novel appear at the end to have been somewhat contrived: one feels that Powell's concluding *hommage* to his master was imposed as an act of literary will (an ironic thought) rather than arising organically from the structure of the novel as a whole.

It is tempting, if far too easy, to suggest that Anthony Powell might have done better to bring *A Dance to the Music of Time* to a close on the eve of World War II. But to have jettisoned the last six volumes would have meant losing the mordant tale of Widmerpool's cuckolding. Pamela Flitton and X. Trapnel, two of Powell's very best characters, would have gone unchronicled. And I, for one, would not willingly do without the countless small delights with which all of *Dance*, even the three wartime volumes, is packed: the delicious jokes, the wry flashes of parody, the deft "reminiscential effects" (as Philip Larkin calls them) that Powell draws from the virtuosic manipulation of his huge cast of characters.

These varied effects, which help to make *Dance* so rereadable, are not trivial. They spring from Powell's recognition that life is infinitely more complex than any ideology. Here is Powell on Victor Hugo: "To some people life presents itself as a web of infinite subtlety; to others a picture daubed in the crudest colours." There can be no doubt as to which kind of person the author of *A Dance to the Music of Time* is, or that his view of life is far truer than that of the doctrinaire simplifiers who have done so much to wreck our culture. "In the end," Nick Jenkins reflects in *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant*, "most things in life—perhaps all things—turn out to be appropriate." It is hard to imagine a less ideological statement of artistic and philosophical purpose. Only in an age of ideology run rampant could such a statement itself become a "political" position, and it is against the inhumane priorities of such an age, in which men like Widmerpool seek to revenge themselves on the world by reshaping it in their own twisted images, that Anthony Powell has chosen to take his urbane stand.

Sir Isaiah Berlin, who makes one or two brief appearances in Anthony Powell's memoirs, is a writer whose philosophy one would expect the author of *A Dance to the Music of Time* to find congenial. I am thinking of the line from Kant from which Berlin culled the title of his most recent book: "Out of timber so crooked as that from which man is made, nothing entirely straight can be built." I am thinking, too, of Berlin's graceful gloss of a line from Alexander Herzen: "Art, which resists decay, and the summer lightning of happy love, are all that we can cling to in our lives." Either line could stand at the head of *Dance*. Powell's characters, "unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance," are in the end dancing in the dark. Lacking any transcendent values in which to place their trust, they must go it on their own, certain only that the road to power leads away from the palace of wisdom, consoled only by the permanent beauties of art and the fleeting solace of love.

For those who demand more out of a novelist than that, Powell may well not prove a very satisfactory writer. Those who go to *Dance* in search of spiritual revelation will certainly find it wanting. And even those who share Powell's skepticism may feel that he does not offer the ultimate insights of the very greatest novelists. Philip Larkin, hardly an orthodox moralist, came to just this conclusion after reading *Books Do Furnish a Room*:

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> A final and fundamental reservation . . . is how far we are reading a work of imagination which will attain a cathartic climax and leave us feeling we have learned something of life. At first it seemed we were, the evolution of Widmerpool being a case in point. Later books suggest that we are simply reading what happens to have happened to Nick Jenkins, with the growing suspicion that something very similar also happened to Mr. Powell.

But Powell is not, I think, trying to achieve a "cathartic climax" in *Dance*, and it is necessary to judge him not only against the supreme achievements of a Tolstoy or a Henry James but on his own terms as well. These terms are clearly implied in one of *Dance*'s funniest scenes, in which Nick Jenkins finds himself talking about literature with a general whose favorite author is Anthony Trollope. Politely begging to differ and abruptly being ordered to supply *his* idea of a good novelist, Jenkins is rendered speechless: "For the moment, I could not remember the name of a single novelist, good or bad, in the whole history of literature. Who was there? Then, slowly, a few admired figures came to mind—Choderlos de Laclos—Lermontov—Svevo . . . Somehow these did not have quite the right sound."

Anthony Powell would no doubt be happy to share a modest niche in the history of European literature with these admired minor figures. But the sheer scale of *A Dance to the Music of Time* necessarily places him on a more exalted level. And perverse though it may seem to have attempted so unlikely an undertaking as a comic *roman fleuve* about the will to power, he brings it off triumphantly. No Proust, or even Waugh, he is nonetheless a writer to be treasured: a great comedian who rose to his theme, and above his *genre*, to produce one of the most distinctive and satisfying multivolume novels of our time.

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Pantagruelism for our time? Rabelais reconsidered

by D. S. Carne-Ross

The late Donald Frame's new translation of Rabelais is fluent, resourceful, and, I believe, accurate, a scholar's long labor of love. [1] Since few except specialists are at ease in his sixteenth-century French, this holds out the promise of being the standard English Rabelais for a generation or so. A fresh version of a famous book may always raise the question of status, a question that ought to be faced squarely at a time when, with our literary inheritance under attack, we cannot afford the luxury of maintaining the whole traditional canon. Those works that do not powerfully address us should be—not, certainly, discarded, for they may speak again tomorrow, but set to one side, their claim on our attention no longer pressed.

Where does Rabelais stand today? What does he have to offer? To use his own term, he offers us Pantagruelism, which Frame translates as "a certain gayety of spirit confected in disdain for fortuitous things." (One may prefer J. M. Cohen's rendering in the 1955 Penguin version: "A certain lightness of spirit compounded of contempt for the chances of fate.") The Rabelaisian prescription for this happy state of health is a good swig of the juice of the magic herb Pantagruelion, "l'exemplaire de toute joyeuse perfection." Clearly something we should all take, though perhaps there ought to be a label on the bottle advising the patient to begin with small doses, for this is strong medicine.

Rabelais comes to us as a liberator, inviting us to throw off all constraints and enjoy the freedom of our entire being. Some of the freedoms he offers the contemporary reader may be inclined to turn down, but the true Pantagruelist will not do so. He will laugh heartily at a passage like the following, which Mikhail Bakhtin calls "the anatomizing enumeration of injured organs": [2]

> They feted him with great blows with the gauntlets, so roundly that it left him all punchy and bruised, with one eye poached in butter sauce, eight broken ribs, his breast bone knocked in, his shoulder blades each in four quarters, his lower jaw in three pieces, and all this done laughing.

Et le tout en riant. The Victorian reader could reassure himself with the thought that this sort of thing happened a long time ago in a brutal age when people were inured to physical violence. We no longer have this resource and must take such passages neat. There is a good deal of rough-and-tumble in Rabelais's book, offered to us as a glorious entertainment, which now sounds more like a grim reminder of how nasty the liberated

1 *The Complete Works of François Rabelais*, translated from the French by Donald M. Frame, with a foreword by Raymond C. La Charité; University of California Press, 1,067 pages, $60.

2 In *Rabelais and His World*, translated from the Russian by Helene Iswolsky (1968).

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human animal is. Not pleasant reading, but perhaps tonic nonetheless. Without at all wishing to put in a word for mayhem, one may wonder if we have not gone too far in trying to gentle the human condition, and in so doing moved too far from the norm. Of classical Athens Socrates remarked that it was a place where anything could happen to anyone. Pope, after publishing the *Dunciad*, engaged three burly Irishmen to ward off bodily reprisal from those who had felt his lash. Yet Socrates' Athens and Pope's London were not lacking in civility, even if eyes were poached in butter sauce now and then and a few ribs broken. All part of the day's round. Haw haw?

There are many rude regions into which this great liberator leads us, some of which we have not visited since the uninhibited days of the nursery when bowel movements were a matter of lively debate. Rabelais "enjoys talk of healthy elimination, liquid or solid," Frame notes demurely. A chapter is devoted to the occasion when Panurge "beshat himself in panic fear" at the noise of a cannonade, and tells how a certain Siennese, playfully pronged with a fork, "dunged more copiously than nine buffaloes." There is no moral issue here; it is a matter of taste. La Bruyère, in a politer age, censured Rabelais for having "semé l'ordure" in his writing, and in this century George Orwell thought his "preoccupation with the W.C." unhealthy. Personally, I find it hard to share his pleasure in monstrous farts, the dropping of bum guts, knock-about fun with fresh turds and so forth, and can do so only when he shows some genuine fantasy and invention, as he does in the chapter on the young Gargantua's discovery of the best method of arse-wiping. Having tried various means, his mother's gloves, bed linen, curtains, cushions, etc., etc., he decides that "a good downy gosling, provided you hold his head between your legs," gives the greatest satisfaction. A usage recommended by Duns Scotus, Rabelais tells us. On the whole, though, Aristophanes, an author often paired with Rabelais, strikes me as more rewarding here, as when he tells how one of his unfortunates, assaulted by a drunk as he comes home late at night, picks up what he hopes is a stone to throw at the fellow, but which turns out to be a shiny turd. Helped along by the brisk comic meter, I can comfortably manage a chuckle.

The prelude to Book I begins with an address to "noble topers," *beuveurs tres illustres*, Rabelais's ideal readers, and his heroes with enormous gusto consume large quantities of food and drink. Here too, one might think, no moral issue is involved, yet strong inhibitions, bordering on prohibitions, are in force. There are those, one gathers, who devote much anxious thought to their cholesterol level, and every bottle of wine one buys carries with it an impertinent warning from the Surgeon General on the possible hazards to health. What has it got to do with him? Our health is our own business, and if one enjoys gorging heavy food and drinking oneself under the table every night as English country gentlemen did in robuster periods of the nation's history, so be it. A short life, perhaps, but if it be a merry one, what of it? There is no moral obligation to prolong one's existence to an age when most of its pleasures and alleviations are out of bounds. Pantagruelism, with its grossly hedonistic celebration of the pleasures of the table, may have a lesson worth heeding nowadays, particularly in America, where the cult of health, the fantasy of perfect health, is getting seriously out of hand. If Theophrastus were writing his *Characters* today, there would be a chapter on The Hypochondriac.

Given Rabelais's reputation, one would expect to find him richly endowed with that "relish for wholesome bawdy" which Ian Watt, speaking of Fielding, called "part of the moral education of a sex-bedevilled humanity."[3] This sort of thing:

> When the Feat of the Loose-Coat Skirmish happeneth to be done underhand and privily, between two well-disposed, athwart the Steps

3 In *The Rise of the Novel* (1957).

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> of a Pair of Stairs, lurkingly, and in covert, behind a Suit of Hangings, or close hid and trussed upon an unbound Faggot, it is more pleasing to the Cyprian Goddess, (and to me also, I speak this without prejudice to any better or more sound Opinion) than to perform the Culbusting Art, after the Cynick manner, in the view of the clear Sunshine—

and so forth. Wait though, this is not exactly Rabelais but his great seventeenth-century Scots translator, Sir Thomas Urquhart. The Frenchman is more matter of fact about it, even a bit off-hand. Here is Donald Frame's account, keeping close to the original:

> The little business [*la chosette*] performed on the sly, between two closed doors, across the stairs, behind the tapestry, on a pile of loose kindling, is more pleasing to the Cyprian goddess (and that's where I stand, without prejudice to higher authority), than performed in view of the sun, Cynic style—

The fact is that, in the great realm over which Aphrodite presides (laughter-loving, Greek poets called her, though liberal shepherds might hear a grosser meaning in her epithet), [4] Rabelais is disappointing. The writer who would liberate us from our sexual preoccupations must himself feel their enormous pull, must be very interested in sex. Rabelais is not. He is "rarely erotic, normally scatological," Frame writes. "When he comes close to the erotic, he tends to skirt it or turn it to the grotesquely comic." Rabelaisian comedy in this sphere is that of the schoolboy who does not understand what it is that grown-ups make such a fuss about. Take Panurge, who is by way of being an amorous fellow. Finding himself drawn to a fine Parisian lady, he makes indecent advances which she very properly rejects. To get his own back, he cuts up the pudenda of a bitch in heat and, following her into church, smears them on her clothes, whereupon half the dogs in Paris follow the unfortunate woman, urinating on her. Grotesque enough, but hardly what the dustcover of Frame's translation calls rib-tickling. Etienne Gilson shows in a learned article that this sort of humor is found in medieval Franciscan sermons and is really quite pious. [5] Instructive to the student of religious pathology, but not much help with Rabelais.

Panurge's sexual interests receive further treatment a little later in the same book when he accompanies Pantagruel in an attack on a city inhabited by "a hundred and fifty thousand whores, lovely as goddesses." This worries Panurge, who wonders how he will be able "to get the time to impale the whores . . . so that not one will escape my beating her drum in the usual fashion." Ha, ha, ha, says Pantagruel, making the correct response to the pleasures of mass rape.

Those in search of relish, healing relish for wholesome bawdy, must go elsewhere, to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, for instance, with her great cry "Venus me yaf my lust, my likerousnesse," or to Rabelais's near contemporary Ariosto, to Canto 28 of *Orlando Furioso*, where he tells three interlocking stories on the theme of sexual betrayal, treated in descending order of gravity. First, a man much in love with his wife leaves her to go on a journey, but finding that he has left something behind soon turns back and discovers his wife already in bed with a lover. His pain is presented only briefly, but it is genuine and he is not mocked. Heart-stricken, he sets out again on his way to visit a certain king who believes himself to be the most handsome man in the world. Yet the king finds himself in the same plight, for looking through a crack in the wall he sees his wife being ridden by a hideous dwarf. He explodes into a frenzy of opera-buffa rage and the two deceived men, deciding that no woman is faithful, set out on a tour, seducing all the wives they can find until, growing weary of the sport, they take a servant girl called Fiammetta and enjoy her favors mutually. This ménage à trois works well until the

4 *Philomeidēs.* In the second element of the compound, signifying laughter, one may also hear *mēdea*, the genitals.

5 In *Les Idées et les lettres* (1932).

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girl's former lover turns up and begs her to grant him just one night. I'd like to as much as you, she says, but how can I? I'm always in bed with the pair of them. You can find a way, he tells her, and she does, managing to introduce him into the communal bed and allowing Ariosto to rise to the Olympian jocundity of the stanza beginning "Fra l'una e l'altra gamba di Fiammetta." Next morning the two men accuse each other of taking more than their fair share of the girl, and ask her who the lucky man was. Thinking her trick discovered, she starts crying and confesses the truth. Too staggered at first to speak, they burst into a gale of laughter that blows a great many cobwebs away, and peaceably return to their wives. Here, as never in Rabelais, is the relish that Ian Watt spoke of, the moral education of a sex-bedevilled humanity administered in exquisite Italian verse compacted into octave stanzas as shapely as the couplets of Pope.

In his chapter on Rabelais in *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach writes that it is "triumphant, earthly life which calls forth his realistic and super-realistic mimesis." His "entire effort is directed toward playing with things and with the multiplicity of their possible aspects; . . . upon tempting [the reader] out into the great ocean of the world, in which he can swim freely, though at his own peril." Auerbach's discussion of Rabelais is brilliant and highly persuasive until, or so it seems to me, one turns not simply to the episodes which he studies but to the work as a whole. On doing so, one may wonder whether too many aspects of earthly life are not missing to call for so large a claim. When Rabelais has to deal not with his usual fantastic or grotesque goings-on but with the events of everyday existence, there is a disconcerting thinness in his treatment, a lack of ordinary human sympathy and understanding, even of interest. The point may be illustrated by comparing the ways in which he and another great humorous writer, Aristophanes again, handle a similar subject, the right of newly married men to a period of exemption from military service. Rabelais gives first the case for this privilege—they should have time to beget an heir—then against: "In the course of this first year, they would have thumped their newly won ladyloves so roundly (as is their rightful debt and duty), and so drained their spermatic vessels, that it left them all bedraggled, all unmanned, all enervated and drooping, so that when the day of battle came they would sooner take a dive like ducks than stand up with the fighters." The treatment is one-dimensional and quite impersonal; no individual human beings are involved. The provision of heirs, "thumping," and sexual exhaustion, that is all.

Aristophanes, not the gentlest of writers, does at least glimpse a further dimension. The hero of his *Acharnians*, Dikaiopolis, possesses a magical "peace wine" which confers numerous benefits and is much in demand. Most of those who come asking for a drop of the precious liquid are turned rudely away, but a young girl, friend of a newly married bride, gets a more sympathetic hearing. She is shy and whispers her request into Dikaiopolis' ear. He is amused, but he gives her a small phial of the wine, and explains how the bride is to apply it. When recruitment takes place, she is to "frotter avec l'onguent, la nuit, l'endroit sensible de son mari," as the Budé translation chastely has it. Aristophanes too is playing for a laugh, but he gives the scene a certain humanity, a touch of tenderness even, that is quite lacking in Rabelais.

Undoubtedly his book displays a wide diversity of action and behavior. At the high level there is the Abbey of Thélème, where men and women, noble by nature and further ennobled by their humanistic training, can live according to the famous motto, FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS, because honor "impels them to virtuous deeds and holds them back from vice." At the low level are those for whom Thélème's motto may be not too unfairly represented by the gutter injunction displayed by some people on the back of their cars, "If you want to, do it." What is missing is the large area in between these two levels, below the refined existence of the Abbey and above the gross, all-male humors

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of the tavern where Rabelais and his noble topers spend most of their time. What is missing, and what is required if we are to speak, as Auerbach does, of "the wealth of phenomena" and triumphant earthly life, is the large middle realm, the *whole* realm of merry middle earth where Chaucer, a greater writer, is so richly at home.

But of course I have been getting Rabelais out of focus, at least in part, because I have been approaching him through Donald Frame's translation. A good translation but a modern one and, as such, for all its fidelity to the words of the original, incapable of bringing across the world of the original, a world very unlike our own. Surely, though, the two worlds have much in common? Poaching a man's eye in butter sauce is the same thing, whatever the date. No. Rabelais and his readers found it funny, most people now do not, and it is hard to believe that Donald Frame, a law-abiding twentieth-century American professor, did so.

Take this matter of altered response to the text—to Book III, for instance, which is much concerned with Panurge's desire to get married. He has two questions: should he do so, and, if he does, will he be cuckolded? The answer to the first question is, If you want to, go ahead; to the second, In all probability, yes. Here is a passage from the debate in Frame's translation:

> "You'll be a cuckold, my fine fellow, I assure you, you'll have beautiful horns. Heh, heh, heh, our own Master de Cornibus, God preserve you! . . ." "The other way around" said Panurge, "my dream presages that in my marriage I'll have all goods in plenty together with the horn of abundance. You'll say they'll be satyr's horns. *Amen* [to that]*!* . . . Thus I'd eternally have my gimlet at the ready and indefatigable, as the satyrs have. . . . In consequence, a cuckold never, for the lack of that is the cause *sine qua non*, the sole cause of making husbands cuckolds."

Reading this passage, I have to remind myself that putting the horns on a man is one of those venerable sources of humor that passed happily down the ages, and was much enjoyed in Rabelais's day. It was only when a wife ceased to be regarded as her husband's exclusive property that the fun vanished, leaving only the pain. In duty bound, since Rabelais is a classic, I read on but remain straight-faced.

So I try the original:

> "Tu sera coqu, homme de bien, je t'en asceure: tu auras belles cornes. Hay, hay, hay, nostre maistre de Cornibus, Dieu te guard!" —"Au rebours, (dist Panurge), mon songe presagist qu'en mon mariage j'auray planté [abundance] de tous biens avecques la corne d'abondance. Vous dictez que seront cornes de Satyres. Amen, amen . . . Ainsi auroys je eternellement le virolet en poinct et infatiguable, comme l'ont let Satyres. . . . Par consequent coqu jamais, car faulte de ce est cause sans laquelle non, cause unicque, de faire les mariz coquz."

Better. The joke may be dead, but there is a succulence in the language that keeps the exchange alive. I am impeded, however, since I am unable to move at ease in Rabelais's sixteenth-century French, and can only guess at the qualities which distinguished French writers have found in it—Flaubert, for example, who spoke of "the sacrosanct, immense, and superlatively beautiful Rabelais." A good many educated Frenchmen today, I gather, prefer to read him in modern French translation. The English-speaking reader is more fortunate and can get closer than that. Here is the same passage translated—transmogrified, if you like—by Sir Thomas Urquhart:

> "Thou wilt be a cuckold, an honest one, I warrant thee; O the brave horns that will be born by thee! Ha, ha, ha. Our good Master de Cornibus, God save thee and shield thee . . ." "You are (quoth Panurge) very far mistaken in your Interpretation; for the matter is quite contrary to your sence thereof; my Dream presageth, that I shall by Marriage be stored with plenty of all manner of Goods, the hornifying

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> of me shewing, that I will possess a Cornucopia, that Amalthean Horn, which is called, The Horn of Abundance . . . You possibly will say, that they are rather like to be Satyrs Horns; Amen, Amen . . . Thus I shall have my Touch-her-home still ready; my Staff of Love sempiternally in a good case, will, Satyr-like, be never toyled out . . . Hence doth it follow by a consequence as clear as the Sun-beams, that I will never be in the danger of being made a Cuckold, for the defect hereof is, *Causa sine qua non*; yea, the sole cause (as many think) of making Husbands Cuckolds."

Although Urquhart was writing more than a century after Rabelais (the first two books of his translation were published in 1653, the third in 1693, after his death; he did not do the last two books), he still breathed much the same air, and his prose, not yet chastened by the spirit of the new age, has the abounding energy and invention of our language at its greatest, full of what Sir Thomas Browne called "the wild enormities of ancient magnanimity." When I read Urquhart's Rabelais, I do not need to call on my historical sense to quicken dead jokes into pallid, classroom life. The translator for whom cuckoldry is "the hornifying of me" has what it takes, and in his hands Rabelais can trumpet his boisterous summons to pleasure at full blast, letting the old unregenerate Adam, all modern inhibitions cast aside, rear his brutal head again. *Hay, hay, hay, nostre maistre de Cornibus*, laughs Frère Jean, and so do I. Here, surely, is relish for wholesome bawdy, what Charles Whibley in an excellent essay called "the full-blooded wanton joyousness" [6] that gives Rabelais the best claim he has to a stand among the liberating classics of our literature.

Very spirited, it will no doubt be objected, but this is Urquhart, not Rabelais. It is far too free to be called a translation, extravagantly expansive, almost in fact a new piece of writing. The large liberties of Tudor translation which Urquhart still enjoyed (I expect to be told) are no longer permissible. Accurate in the professorial sense, it must be granted, Urquhart is certainly not, but the credentials of this word shouldn't be allowed to pass unchallenged. Accuracy, close fidelity to the letter, is an academic fetish whose validity as a general principle varies greatly from author to author and from genre to genre. The translator of Aristotle must reproduce, as closely as English will permit, exactly what Aristotle wrote. With Montaigne too, accuracy matters, but less so. We want to understand his thought, and here Florio often fails us, but we also want as much as we can get of the generosity and range of his prose, which Florio conveys far better than any modern translator can hope to do. With Rabelais, local fidelity has at best a limited importance. If your author requires you to describe the pleasures of heavy eating and drinking, of physical violence, codpiece drolleries, and vast bowel movements, what matters is gusto, verve, the ability to enjoy these things as much as Rabelais did, and, above all, riotous verbal invention. On all these counts, Urquhart scores the highest marks. No matter if he has six words where the French makes do with three, [7] provided that they are the right words for the occasion; no matter if he adds clauses and whole sentences of his own, provided that they contribute the right sap and savor to this work, *ce beau livre de haulte gresse*, slightly to adjust the untranslatable phrase which Auerbach admired. Someone, to be sure, should know precisely what Rabelais wrote. That is the province of the French scholar. For the rest of us, Urquhart provides the royal road to this author.

In making such a claim for Urquhart, I come up against another objection. It is commonly and not improperly held that a great book, a classic, should be retranslated every generation or two. The really fine translation, in part because it is so fine, does not so

6 In *Studies in Frankness* (1898).

7 To describe, for example, Diogenes rolling his tub, Rabelais uses sixty verbs; Urquhart provides a further forty.

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much date as harden, grow opaque, the transparency that once let the original shine through lost. It becomes no longer a translation but a minor classic in its own right. This is undoubtedly true of translation from Greek or Latin. No age, hence no translator, stands in a privileged relation to the original, for the relation changes. Although Pope's *Iliad* is the greatest translation we are ever likely to have, the Homer that we read today is not the Homer that Pope read, hence new versions are needed, or will anyway continue to be produced, even though all are doomed to near certain failure.

The situation is, however, different when the translator is more or less coeval with his author and there is a real affinity of spirit, for then a relation of privilege can exist. Urquhart fulfills these conditions sufficiently for the claim to be made that his version of the first three books is the Rabelais for our day and for any other day, Rabelais Englished so successfully that no other versions are called for, neither Donald Frame's good piece of work nor the two previous modern versions now available. Urquhart's is the translation for the common reader (supposing this admirable person still to exist), the translation that should be used in those survey courses in which the young are taken on quick conducted tours through the various regions of our literature. Let enough of his rare words be glossed to allow one to read on in comfort, and let there be a scholarly introduction pointing to the liberties (the *kind* of liberties) he takes and, more important, showing how his language differs from that of the original. Rabelais has been called the creator of modern French prose; the comparable claim could not possibly be made for Urquhart. The introduction should also look at passages where he misrepresents Rabelais's thought. A Highland Scotsman, he is, in the literal sense of the word, more eccentric than Rabelais, who, for all his extravagance, is still a man of the center, a representative voice of Renaissance humanism, in a way that the Highlander, erudite and widely traveled though he was, could not be.

A larger, different question remains, the question about status which I began with. Is Rabelais one of those authors who, like Montaigne and Cervantes, survive the passage of time and speak to each new age, or does he belong too completely to his own age to have very much to say to ours? For all his range, his version of the human comedy leaves out a great deal. Are there "certain stops in the organ of humanity" that we feel to be wanting? And, an embarrassing question, are *we* ready for Rabelais? It may be that we are too *détraqués*, our culture simply too aberrant, to give a proper hearing to that full-blooded message. Pantagruelism is for robuster, saner times. The juice of the magic herb Pantagruelion, *l'exemplaire de toute joyeuse perfection*, is too potent a tonic to be safely prescribed today. We need instead Homeric *mōlu*, antidote against the dehumanizing potions of Circe.

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Poems *by Frederick Morgan & Richard Tillinghast*

Hypatia

εἰς οὐρανὸν γάρ ἐστι σοῦ τὰ πράγματα

When the vile monks of Nitria
butchered the chaste philosopher
their new God triumphed, so it seemed:
the old ones had forsaken her.

This murder took place years ago,
in March, anno domini 415,
during the holy time of Lent.
Alexandria was the scene.

Hypatia the neoplatonist,
while driving to her school to teach,
was cornered by the filthy swarm
who cursed her for a pagan bitch

and pulled her from her chariot.
The woman was without defense:
she'd scorned the warnings of her friends,
relying on her innocence.

They dragged her to the nearest church
(it seemed the most appropriate place)

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and stripped her naked there, and jeered,
howling with glee at her disgrace—

then beat her down to the sacred floor
and hacked the live flesh from her bones
with tiles and shards and oyster shells—
then hoisted high the sad remains

and marched in triumph up and down
the city's colonnaded ways,
shouting the praises of their God
and vengeance on his enemies.

They burned all that was left of her—
last of the great Plotinian line,
Theon's daughter, Synesius' friend,
humbled to dust by Coptic swine.

The bishop who had egged them on,
Cyril (later canonized),
made known to all the outside world
he was displeased, shocked, mortified

by this excess of righteous zeal.
Still, he kept safe his scurvy crew
by bribing all the magistrates:
he'd have more work for them to do . . .

And that was it. Hypatia died.
The old gods faded past recall.
A new god triumphed—if new he was,
and not the oldest one of all.

—Frederick Morgan

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"I called up Myrtis from the dead . . ."

I called up Myrtis from the dead
to be my friend and lover.
She placed both hands upon my head
and burned me with a fever,

and said, "Strange man, why do you hope
to make your peace with evil days,
with vermin who infect your land
and soil the beauty of its ways?

Withdraw, and leave them to their filth.
Their illness is not yours to cure
who've drawn your strength from ancient things
and healed your own despair—

withdraw into the secret life!"
Gently she touched my face—
then faded, leaving me to mourn
and call up Talos in her place.

—Frederick Morgan

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Manhattan, deconstructing

I walk west with a suitcase on 81st
Where among taxis the blacktop crests
At the broad opening of Park. In the unbuilt sky
Overhead, unfamiliar birdsong—seagulls
Blown inland off Atlantic squalls.
Underfoot, the controlled thunder of the IRT.

Wasn't 81st a trail once, dusty from Easter
To autumn? Draught horses watered at troughs here
And dragged tons of fish and salt through mud uphill
Over decades of winters—before the oaks were cut
For lumber and firewood, the streams made straight
And channeled underground; before the topsoil

Had the breath bricked out of it, and purple loosestrife
Flaring in ditches was crushed under asphalt.
Hillsides upstate were alloyed into steel; cement
Hardened; storey above storey the city rose.
Uniformed like admirals, unfurling umbrellas,
Doormen appear now, eyeing the firmament.

That repercussion I hear as I step out
To claim a cab—that descending note
Across the black keys of the air—is that the approaching
Storm's flourish, or something new being demolished
As the city grows? Or is it an oblivious
Left-handed bass-run played before some open

Window? As I look up to divine its source,
A raindrop strikes me square in the face.
My airport taxi accelerates me out of town,
Slipping through traffic's congestive confluence,
Through the chord, the discordant concordance
Of Manhattan—built-up, weighed-down, put-upon.

—Richard Tillinghast

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Music

A tale of two orchestras

by Samuel Lipman

Do conductors make a difference? Do these highly paid wielders of the baton really change the sound of the orchestras they lead? Two concerts I heard in New York in the last week of February suggested an answer to these questions. In the first concert, at Fisher Hall on February 25, I heard the New York Philharmonic, conducted by its new music director, Kurt Masur; in the second concert, at Carnegie Hall on February 28, I heard the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by its frequent guest conductor, Lorin Maazel. The result of my concert-going was proof, hardly necessary but nevertheless somewhat surprising, that conductors do make a difference.

To demonstrate the truth of this old adage, I should begin by telling the reader something of my history of hearing these orchestras in these halls in recent years. Over the past decade and more, I have heard the Philharmonic, in Fisher Hall, conducted most often by (in alphabetical order) Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, Erich Leinsdorf, and, of course, Zubin Mehta; I have also heard the Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall, conducted by Eugene Ormandy, with Vladimir Horowitz as the aging but still heroic piano soloist. Not surprisingly, I have attended the Vienna less. But about 1988 I did hear a Vienna rehearsal in Carnegie Hall, conducted by Claudio Abbado; in 1989 I heard the orchestra in Carnegie conducted by Herbert von Karajan in his last appearances in New York; in 1990 I heard the orchestra, again in Carnegie, conducted by Leonard Bernstein in what was certainly one of his last appearances in New York.

Under every conductor save Boulez, the New York Philharmonic impressed me repeatedly in the great works of the orchestral literature as a coarse-sounding ensemble made up of what clearly were exceptional players. It is true that under Boulez the orchestra seemed more transparent and musically controlled; but Boulez's specialities in any case were to be found in contemporary music rather than in the core works of the classical and romantic repertory. The orchestra seemed at its coarsest under Mehta, who insisted on egging on the brass, as if in great music climax were all. Even under their much-loved Bernstein, however, the Philharmonic rarely played with the combination of exactitude, finesse, and lush tone that the quality of its players might, under other leadership, have produced.

My experience of the Vienna Philharmonic prior to this past February was quite different. Under Abbado, the rehearsal of the "Pastorale" Symphony elicited an extraordinary, "woodsy" sound from the orchestra; it seemed to me as I sat in Carnegie Hall that the orchestra's sound should be called by the name of the famous Strauss waltz *G'schichten aus dem Wienerwald*—"Tales from the Vienna Woods." The tone of the orchestra seemed to be determined not so much by its strings as by its winds, and by the special French horns of which the

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Vienna is so proud. Here, I thought, was the musical sound of Austria, suggesting a direct line from Beethoven to Mahler.

The next time I heard the Vienna—this time in a real concert, now under Karajan—was in February of 1989. At that moment I quickly became conscious that I was hearing the end of an era of musical history. The program was made up simply of the Schubert "Unfinished" and six Strauss waltzes and polkas—five by Johann and one by Josef. [1] The Schubert was Karajan's apotheosis as the greatest conductor to emerge since World War II. In the Schubert, the orchestra was not absolutely perfect in execution, for the palpable tension caused by Karajan's all too obvious control precluded any real comfort in playing. But though the notes were on rare occasions not quite perfect, the timbre of the orchestra was transcendentally beautiful; the sound was elegant, the quintessence of refinement, and the most musically beguiling imaginable. The result was not a Viennese Schubert, and the orchestra did not sound, as it had under Abbado, like a Viennese orchestra: the Schubert Karajan and the Vienna played was not of a place but for all time. In other hands, the "Unfinished" can be hackneyed, but this was a performance of Schubert that stood as a living artistic rebuke to all the coarseness that had been taking place for the whole decade of the 1980s just a few blocks uptown at Lincoln Center.

The next Vienna concert I heard took place in March of 1990. Now the program was Mahler—the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* and the *Rückert Lieder* (with the soloist in both the American baritone Thomas Hampson)—along with Sibelius—the Symphony no. 1 in E minor—led by Bernstein at the very end of his career. Artistically, the entire concert seemed ripped-apart, with not a single musical point anywhere allowed to make itself in a natural fashion. This was superstar conducting to a fault. The orchestra playing often seemed shaky, probably because they were often held back to an unreasonable extent, so that when they played full-out they might be able to achieve the heightened contrasts so dear to Bernstein's heart. In the Sibelius the orchestra did have a certain Viennese sound—an odd presence in this very Nordic symphony.

Much has changed in concert life in the past two years. Mehta has been replaced at the Philharmonic by the *echt deutsch* Kurt Masur; Abbado has gone on to become the music director of the Berlin Philharmonic; Karajan and Bernstein, who each in his own way fought death tooth and nail, have gone to their maker. And so the two concerts I heard in the last week in February were new to me. I had previously avoided going to hear Masur live at the Philharmonic: so much had been done to the Philharmonic by Bernstein, Boulez, and finally Mehta over three decades that anyone brought in to fix matters deserved a little time to set things right. Furthermore, the televised opening-night concert Masur did with the Philharmonic in September, which I did watch, seemed a mixed effort, both in program—it included two short works by the minimalist turned would-be romantic John Adams, songs by Aaron Copland, and the Bruckner Symphony no. 7—and in execution, with all too much of the Mehta spirit still in evidence in the aggressive sound of the orchestra.

I am glad to say that everything seemed quite different at the February concert. The program had been scheduled to begin with two works of César Franck, the rarely heard symphonic poem *Les Eolides* followed by the celebrated Symphony in D minor, with the second half consisting solely of the Brahms Symphony no. 2 in D major. But in the event *Les Eolides* was replaced by the "When Jesus Wept" movement from the *New England Triptych* of William Schuman, played in memory of the composer, who had just died. Masur and the orchestra seemed a bit lacking in tension and musically cautious

1 For my description see "Karajan: The Last Time?" in *The New Criterion*, April 1989.

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in the Schuman, which in any case is hardly a work by which to judge a virtuoso orchestra. But even in the Schuman, the string sound happily had a silky quality that I do not remember hearing from the Philharmonic in the Bernstein, Boulez, or Mehta years.

The Franck Symphony is, of course, a virtuoso showpiece *par excellence* for a great orchestra. From the opening of the Franck, it was plain to me that what had only been hinted at in the Schuman was absolutely true: Masur's Philharmonic is very different from, and a great improvement on, Mehta's. My impression was of a gentle-sounding ensemble, capable of producing polished sounds from their instruments in a wide, and a constantly varying, range of dynamics. Many members of the orchestra, including many strings in addition to the brass, now sit on risers; the double basses have been moved from the side to the very back. Gone was the gritty, grainy sound of the past; most welcome, gone too was the incessant screeching of woodwinds and blasting of brass.

It is a major change that Masur has wrought at the Philharmonic. To say this is not to endorse his performance of the Franck. I found it almost totally lacking in drama; completely missing, or so it seemed to me, was any identification by Masur with the very real presence of suffering and pain in this, as in so many other works by Franck. Franck was not just a mid- to late-nineteenth-century Franco-Belgian romantic; he was also a deeply Christian artist whose music reflects the suffering, the pity, and the triumph that nineteenth-century Catholicism found in the life of Christ. These characteristics suffuse the symphony from the questioning and sorrowful opening, to the D major apotheosis in the finale. In Masur's performance, this welter of feeling was so restrained, and so gracious, that the result seemed not even French, but rather Frenchified.

Fortunately, it was a different story with the Brahms. Here Masur was at last on his home ground, and he acquitted himself nobly. Here was a kind of Brahms playing, cushioned and suave, that we have not heard in many years at the Philharmonic. The opening D major theme of the first movement seemed eminently sunny; everything that followed had weight, measure, and proportion. Though not all the orchestra playing—particularly in the brass—in this difficult work was perfectly reliable, the overall quality of the sound was on a high enough level to make me feel that my faith in the individual talent of the Philharmonic players was now, under Masur's leadership, to be fully realized in the ensemble.

I left Fisher Hall thinking that Masur was indeed a good thing for the Philharmonic. To judge by this concert, Masur will be happier conducting pure, rather than program music; perhaps he was happier in the Brahms than he had been in the Franck—all questions of national origins aside—because whereas the Franck is first emotion and then music, the Brahms is first music and only then emotion. But at the same time I had another, and less happy, thought about the Philharmonic: the extraordinary gains in ensemble sound that Masur has already realized in such a short time at the Philharmonic have only exposed the fundamentally poor acoustics of the hall which is its home. Now that the orchestra has so fortunately said good-bye to its old raucous habits, I was aware at all times of just how distant the newly refined orchestra sounded—somewhat as if it were playing behind a scrim. The sad fact is that Fisher Hall lacks the immediacy and projection of sound that every great hall must have to provide optimum listening conditions for the audience and optimum playing conditions for the musicians. There is already much talk of rebuilding Fisher Hall yet again; I wonder whether the answer isn't the wrecker's ball, followed by a new start.

No such acoustical problems accompanied the Vienna Philharmonic concert I heard. Carnegie Hall is surely one of the great halls in the world, and I am quite sure that it makes everything played in it sound better. On the night I heard them, the Vienna

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players—very much including their conductor of the evening, Lorin Maazel—could have used all the help the hall afforded. The all-male Vienna is a proud orchestra; it is cooperatively owned, and does not have a music director. Its members come on stage at the last moment, and clearly revel in receiving the applause that in the concerts of other orchestras is reserved for the conductor and the soloist. When they play as they did for Abbado and Karajan, more power to them; when they play as they did for Maazel, their pride seems smug.

There were but two works on the program: the Mozart Symphony no. 40 in G minor, and the Mahler Symphony no. 5. The Mozart, it need hardly be said, is now famous and even over-famous. Thanks to the sour spell cast on the composer by Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, the throbbing opening is now seen as the very epitome of the artist-genius's fate in an ungrateful world. Despite Maazel's decision to give preparatory beats at the opening—itself a sign of discomfort in the performance to come—the start was rocky; the beautiful theme in the violins was clumsily played, with the notes above the staff frequently out of tune. Doubtless at the conductor's direction, all the melodic passages were over-inflected, with an infinity of little swells and disappearances. Like the over-inflection of essentially simple material, the bad intonation continued to the end, with the passages above high C the most frequent offenders. The performance communicated nothing, save the conductor's fussiness and the orchestra's sloppiness.

The Maazel-Vienna performance of the Mahler Fifth was much appreciated in the local press. Part of the reason doubtless is the central position that this work occupies in the hearts of Mahlerians. It is also true that Mahler fans—even the music critics among them—avidly cherish each and every playing of the Master. It is indeed remarkable how rarely a performance of Mahler receives a bad review. I myself am not a Mahlerian, and save for the Ninth Symphony and perhaps the Sixth, I do not find his works musically coherent; judged strictly as music, they seem to me to be preeminently a conductor's compositions, full of knowledge of how the orchestra works, utilized with a conductor's ability to formulate music in small segments. I am well aware that there is an emotional coherence to Mahler, but unfortunately—at least for me—the emotion that is so coherent in Mahler seems all too self-regarding and self-indulgent.

Now that I have made the necesssary caveat, I must say that I found the Vienna performance of the Fifth Symphony singularly unconvincing, with Maazel and the orchestra, both as self-regarding and self-indulgent as the composer, reveling in all the disjunctions with which the work abounds. Despite its many intimate effects, the predominant effect of this performance was brash and blaring. There were instances of ragged ensemble, with little warmth conveyed overall. The powerful musicality that had so nobly characterized Masur's Brahms Second just three days before was here completely lacking. At the end, the audience predictably went off like a Roman candle, and Maazel and the orchestra indubitably had their triumph.

And so I return to the point with which I began: conductors do make a difference. Masur has turned around the New York Philharmonic, and I await hearing him and his orchestra further with keen interest. The Vienna Philharmonic, despite its pretensions to an existence beyond a conductor, seems very much the product—like every other orchestra—of just who is on the podium on any given night. Perhaps the next time I hear the Vienna, its leader for the nonce will remind me more of Abbado or Karajan than of Maazel. Meanwhile, the New York Philharmonic will be giving a lot of concerts with Kurt Masur.

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Art

Breakthrough, idyll, icon, allegory

by Jed Perl

Richard La Presti's new cycle of paintings of the crowd-packed beaches of summertime Long Island is a formidable achievement. These paintings, in which dozens and even hundreds of figures congregate amidst blazing sunshine and sea and sand, combine forcefulness and elegance in ways that bear comparison with works by the greats who've set figures in the midst of landscapes—with the racetrack paintings of Dufy, Marquet's crowded harbors, the Venice of Canaletto, and even Watteau's *fête champêtre*. La Presti's subject is what happens when people take off most of their clothes and bathe in the sea and bask in the sun. The artist who regards the raucous scene is a bit like the lifeguard who, in a number of paintings, is perched above the crowd in an elevated chair. La Presti is watching over the scene, vigilant, up to any challenge. To do such populous landscape paintings is quite a challenge for an artist: he must be a figure painter and a landscape painter, and be both simultaneously. La Presti, who's forty-nine, obviously revels in the overload of elements that this genre-mixing involves. In this show—his third at the Bowery Gallery (it was in February) to center on people at the beach—he's surveying the scene with the easy concentration of the lifeguard. His attention is unforced yet focused everywhere at once. La Presti's brushstrokes, which used to be a bit on the choppy side, are dancing now. The brushwork is muscular but not show-off-ish.

These paintings are shot through with life. The main thing to be said about them is that the more one looks the more one sees. The paintings—which are horizontal and mostly three or more feet wide—hold a viewer with their flood of narrative and pictorial invention. Something in the coming-together of colors and forms and images works on my nervous system, so that my sense of sight is heightened, activated in surprising ways. (What more than that can a painter do?) In La Presti's particular kind of painterly painting, the kinetic drama is in the way that paint keeps turning into flesh, sand, sky, sea without losing its independence, its autonomy. The paintings are full of marvelous, surprising tans and blues—the tans edge off into reds and yellows, the blues go to yellow, purple, green. I look at a paint stroke and register it as just a pat of paint until, a split second later, my eye moves to some smaller strokes that make up a figure, and then, another split second, moving back to the first paint stroke, I find that it's settled back into space as an expanse of sand. La Presti will load his brush with a couple of colors and then pull the brush across the canvas so that, presto, he has rich flesh tones. Paint turns into something-other-than-paint before our eyes. The rapidity of the shifts and transformations gives the scenes their heat and pulse. What a spectacular figure painter La Presti has turned out to be! Very few of the heads have eyes or a nose or a mouth, and yet La Presti, simply by

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showing us a person's physique and way of walking or sitting, tells us all we need to know. He's achieved the calligraphic accuracy of the best little figures in Marquet's cityscapes. Amidst these crowd scenes there are unforgettable vignettes: a black man with broad shoulders and slim hips sauntering down the beach; a middle-aged couple standing, deep in conversation, oblivious to the crowds swirling around them.

I was somewhat put off by all the teeming humanity in La Presti's earlier shows of beach pictures. A few years ago La Presti wasn't fully in control, and one wasn't quite sure what he thought about these hyperactive scenes. It's only now that he is virtuoso enough to convey the refinement of his emotions. An artist who will title a painting *Gulls and Girls* certainly enjoys the wacky free-for-all of a public beach, but now that La Presti has managed to bring his individuals into focus, the scenes take on another kind of psychological complexity. What attracts La Presti is the break with conventional life that summertime at the beach implies. We all know about the summer romances which have the most unlikely couples pairing up, only to realize, come September, that their backgrounds and aspirations and fading tans will pull them apart. In a way, La Presti's beach offers a modern analogy to Watteau's parties, where aristocrats and actors and musicians broke class ranks and intermingled. La Presti has found a rhythm of courtship that fits this modern democracy of love. Watteau's paintings were made of gently curling movements: arms and hands and necks and heads turned and twisted this way and that. In La Presti's contemporary version of a landscape of love the gestures are angular and jagged and bold. La Presti loves to paint the women lying on beach blankets, their teensy bikinis covering only what's absolutely necessary. Everything here is jutting limbs, thrusting angles. The men strut their stuff, the women lie in wait, and it's all observed with an acuity that's both comic and loving. This is an open-air theater in which people see and are seen. There are no pat resolutions. But it's not anarchic and it's not coarse, and that's due to the redeeming eloquence of the artist's brushwork. The sunbathers are actors in a marvelous, open-ended drama. The characterizations are quite vivid but the interactions are purposely left a little vague. You never know what's going to happen beneath the summer sun.

Some people, looking at La Presti's paintings, will think of the work of David Park, another painterly painter who did people in or near water. There is a resemblance, down to the somewhat squarish brushstrokes, but in my opinion it has nothing to do with La Presti imitating David Park. I would turn the comparison around and say that Richard La Presti does the paintings that David Park may have dreamed of doing, but, with his limited painting culture and technique, could not bring off. As for anybody's wondering why they have not heard of La Presti if he's as good as I say he is, well, I can only say it is neither your fault nor La Presti's fault but merely another demonstration that we're living in an art world where black is white and up is down. La Presti's evolution, as demonstrated by his three shows at the Bowery Gallery, is an astonishing example of steadfastness and courage. He has stuck to his subject and his style and he has worked through every problem and challenge, painting by painting, inch by inch. This is a breakthrough show. Right here, right now it doesn't get any better than this.

A cycle of a dozen paintings that the Danish artist Per Kirkeby did during a stay at the Skowhegan School in Maine made a beautiful impression at the Michael Werner Gallery in January and February. This relatively new gallery, in a townhouse on East Sixty-seventh Street between Fifth and Madison, brings to mind a kind of eastside gallery that scarcely any longer exists—a gallery with the natural light and ideal proportions of a really nice New York apartment. The advantage of a space like this is that it allows us to look at paintings comfortably, as if we were in a friend's house. This was just the place for Kirkeby's nature idyll.

The paintings, all vertical, are in two sizes,

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seventy-nine by fifty inches and forty-six by thirty-eight inches. Both in structure and in spirit these compositions recall Monet's Waterlilies. Out of Kirkeby's flow of semi-abstract imagery two interpenetrating planes emerge, one floating toward the viewer, the other pressing back into something resembling the horizontal thrust of Renaissance perspective. In Monet's Waterlilies these two planes, though often treated as virtually abstract forces, relate to the experience of looking at a lily pond: the surface of the pond, strewn with lily pads, becomes a translucent version of the Renaissance ground plane, while our ability to look deep into the water is expressed through another plane that is anti-perspectival and tends to press toward the picture surface. In many of Kirkeby's paintings one also has the sense of looking into a watery world (Lake Skowhegan, perhaps), yet the intimations of forest are equally strong, so that the sense of interpenetrating depth and surface is less literally related to naturalistic transparency than it is in Monet. In Kirkeby's paintings Monet's overlapped planes become a blueprint for memory. Into this casual scaffolding Kirkeby inserts his fragmentary, interweaving impressions. He catches some of the natural world's topsy-turvy variety. The colors are foresty: colors of moss and bark and leaf and sky and earth.

What's impressive in Kirkeby's paintings is the lyrically abrasive mood. Using scumblings and washes and strokes and bits of drawing-with-the-brush in surprising, unexpected relations and overlaps, Kirkeby manages to create abstract paintings that have some of the unexpectedness of a walk through a forest. He does unconventional things with color weights, as when he sometimes thrusts his darker (heavier) colors forward while pushing the lighter (more buoyant) ones into the background. This gives the effect of storm clouds shutting out the sun. There are exciting full-tilt blues, and touches of acidy, metallic coppery orange. We are constantly seeing very near things against very far things. Elements obstruct one another. Kirkeby sets up strong, quirky rhythms. Though the paintings are vertical, the movements through them tend to be horizontal. Kirkeby will array elements —twitchy bits of drawing, snaky forms—in threes or fours horizontally, so our attention is drawn across the surface. He gets our eyes moving at different rates, back and forth.

Kirkeby was born in 1938. In his late twenties he was involved in performance art with Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman. In 1981 his work was included in the "New Spirit in Painting" show in London, which gave Neoexpressionism a push even as it gave the later work of Picasso and Hélion and Balthus some high visibility. Kirkeby's exhibit at Michael Werner suggests how a performance-art sensibility can add something to painting. To Beuys's many admirers he is the man who made messy, unconventional art objects out of the messiness of life itself. Whatever Beuys's charisma as a teacher and a performer (I never saw him), most of the things that he left behind look lifeless, uninteresting. But this does not mean that the desire to give art some of the unexpectedness of life is wrong, and Per Kirkeby's new paintings, with their jumpy, stop-and-start rhythms and their at-an-angle evocations of the natural world, suggest what a Beuys sensibility is like when it's fed back into the world of painting.

The catalogue of the Kirkeby show includes, by way of introduction, an excerpt from a Bruce Chatwin description of dinner with Diana Vreeland. (Michael Werner's catalogues, small hard-covered books, are absolutely charming.) The punch line is Vreeland's description of Wales as "Little grey houses . . . covered in roses . . . in the rain." The point is that Kirkeby's paintings have that same slightly broken, telegraphic descriptive power. I sat in that pleasant room at the Werner Gallery and let the bits and pieces come at me: moss-covered trees, sky above, lake just beyond, twigs, bark, butterflies, insects, leaf-form against cloud-form, new growth in the rich, dark earth.

Carl Plansky, who (according to a biographical sheet available at his gallery) turns

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forty-one this month, had his first New York one-man show at 55 Mercer in February. Though Plansky has exhibited here and there in New York before, I think it's fair to call this an auspicious debut. Plansky's big, thickly painted landscape paintings looked just fine at 55 Mercer—they have impact, assuredness, an unabashed presence. They're not completely resolved (I think there are some deep structural problems), but let's start by saluting an artist who's a painter through and through. I can't think of another artist of Plansky's generation who has such a splendiferous feeling for paint.

These are mostly landscapes, mostly focusing on trees, and mostly very large, the biggest twelve feet long. What attracts one, though, isn't the subject matter so much as what Plansky does with a surface. The paint is worked rapturously, with great variety, and I find myself going very close to the paintings, to enjoy the imaginativeness of the technique. Plansky builds the paint up very thick in some places, but in other places he drips and drizzles, and he works all kinds of thick and thin and bold and choppy brushwork to create a stunningly rich effect. The paint surface has some of the voluptuousness of Hans Hofmann's thickest, paintiest surfaces—there's that sensuous authenticity. One of the great difficulties with painting thick on a large surface is that the surface tends to get worked too heavily all over, so that the painting begins to close down. What's remarkable in Plansky's paintings is that he can work the canvases hard but keep them open. The surfaces stay lively. One section will be globbed and gobbed, while a few inches away you'll practically see bare canvas coming through. This casualness is much harder to maintain than one might imagine. Some of these big compositions have the casualness of Japanese brush paintings, and that's an accomplishment. And there's a nice variety in the color. *Flight to Egypt* has lustrous golden yellows; *Davenport NY* is warmly green.

The horizontal *Davenport*, with a series of vertical trees, has a vague affinity with Annibale Carracci's famous *Landscape* (circa 1590) in the National Gallery in Washington. A number of the other paintings are so abstracted and impastoed that one can't quite make out what one is seeing, save for some vague verticals of trees. The paintings, especially the very large ones, must (I guess) be done in the studio, and while their physicality is impressive their relation to landscape is somewhat unresolved. Clearly, the landscape is a jumping-off point for Plansky, and that's where the trouble seems to begin. Sometimes he hasn't jumped far enough—a shadow or particular juxtaposition of foreground and background will seem annoyingly literal amidst the abstract painterliness of the rest of the picture. At other times I wish he were more specific. Plansky gives his tree forms a fetishistic power, but that same fetishism accounts for an aggravating vagueness. While his paint is worked with ease and poetic conviction, concepts such as foreground and background are often insisted upon with a beginner's primitiveness.

I was thinking something along these lines when I read a statement that Plansky wrote for his show in which he discusses the painting's relation to reality. "Just now I am painting trees. I look at a specific tree, establish its locale, the time of day, the quality of light, and paint it. I become involved with its particularities and get to know it as if I were doing a portrait or even a self-portrait. With this process, I create and destroy repeatedly, until I arrive at the inevitability of this tree. I stop when the image, without losing its own specific identity, becomes an icon for all trees, all nature, all the world beyond the canvas, and myself as well." I think that this way of working accounts for both the rhapsodic force and the wooliness of Plansky's paintings. Could it be that he's trying to get too much out of a tree? Universalizing the specific is a risky business. I suppose Plansky imagines that he's doing for trees what Giacometti did for people; but I think it is a mistaken view of Giacometti that has him universalizing the figure (except in a few very late overlifesize sculpture of female nudes and a few other

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works scattered through the career). I sense that Plansky is at a crossroads—his work could either get more specific or more abstract. For the time being, though, he manages to hold together some very big paintings. This is no mean feat. He obviously feels utterly at ease in front of an eight-by-ten-foot canvas. It's a scale that's natural to him. Plansky is a natural.

"Allegories of Modernism: Contemporary Drawing," at the Museum of Modern Art over the winter, was a show for people who wanted to catch up on the work of hot artists whom they'd heard about but whose work they'd perhaps not yet had a chance to see. If one was wondering about Martin Kippenberger, A. R. Penck, Brice Marden, Sigmar Polke, Christopher Wool, Mike Kelley, here were examples. One didn't even have to go over to the Terry Winters retrospective at the Whitney. For casual gallerygoers who might feel overwhelmed by too much Winters at the Whitney, too much Kippenberger at Metro Pictures, "Allegories of Modernism" had the advantage of offering each artist in the neatly circumscribed form of a small group of graphic works. Bernice Rose, the senior curator in the Department of Drawings at the museum who organized the show, included amidst the drawings some paintings and even a few photocollages; these served to test the definition of a drawing and thereby gave the show a bit of a jazzy air. Rose's catalogue essay has its jazzy-outré side, too. This text is written in the new theoretical lingo, which Rose uses in a manner that is not strictly orthodox, but which, one might say, has a certain weirdly dramatic anti-theoretical effect, so that even as she's wielding the most daunting abstract language, one has the sense that she means it all to actually refer to real phenomenon in the real world. The approach is, I think, more Barthes than Baudrillard.

Much of the creditable work in "Allegories of Modernism" comes out of Abstract Expressionism in one way or another. This goes for Marden, Penck, Kippenberger. A few of Marden's ink drawings have the delicate scratchy casualness of *art informel* of the 1950s; and Penck and Kippenberger both offer cycles of abstract drawings in which sheets of paper are filled to the edges, and not without some zest and taste. Some of Penck's leaping lines could bring Hofmann drawings to mind (not necessarily a compliment: Hofmann's drawing is uneven). Fritz Bultman and Grace Hartigan are other 1950s artists whom Penck could bring to mind. Some of his works would not look out of place in an anthology of drawings from the 1950s. The Pencks come by the yard, but then so did a lot of kinds of drawings in the Fifties. (Penck has done some fairly engaging book illustrations in recent years.) These works—by Marden, Kippenberger, Penck—are among the few in the show in which the artist seems engaged with questions of form and feeling. I suspect that Abstract Expressionism kicks off something real in these artists because it's the only thing resembling an authentic art style which they've ever studied in something more than a cursory fashion. It's the only style that most artists any longer believe is more than a historical curiosity, so when they work in an Abstract Expressionist vein there is at least some passion that's ignited.

I feel some passion in the work of Sigmar Polke as well, and I would guess that this is due to the influence of Abstract Expressionism, too. Polke's overlapping pop-culture images don't amount to much, but he slides line over line and image over image with some vitality, more certainly than David Salle can muster. In the campy collages here, as in his big abstract paintings, Polke is an artist with a genuine feeling for materials and pictorial effect, and if the effect of his work is always ultimately of effects dribbling away, you have to grant Polke that he at least has the wherewithal to make a mark that's definite enough to leave us with a bit of regret at its triviality.

Most of the work that I've just described was in the big basement galleries at the Modern. The show's underlying impulse only came to the surface on the third floor, where two table-level vitrines were filled

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with sketches and sketchbooks by Tom Otterness and George Condo. I made a double take, because on a first fast glance I thought I was looking at vitrines full of Picassos. Anything but. Otterness, best known for his chunky bronze figures involved in sci-fi comedy routines, was doing copies of all kinds of Picassos—late ones, *Demoiselles*-period ones, as well as drawings of Greek sculpture done in a version of Picasso's neoclassical style. Across the way were Condo drawings that mimicked late-Picasso sheet-metal sculpture. What these vitrines brought to mind was the "Je suis le cahier" show of Picasso's sketchbooks that was mounted at the Pace Gallery in 1986. Clearly Condo (who shows at Pace) and Otterness are imagining that they're the Daddy-genius, pouring forth inventions. That's their problem, but what on earth is Bernice Rose's reason for wanting to present their impersonations of Picasso in a way that impersonates that great Picasso drawing show? We know there are postmodern ironists among the artists, but what of a postmodern ironist among the curators at the Museum of Modern Art? This is something new.

I was standing in front of Otterness's clunky *Selected Notebooks* (which are dated 1973-91, though they look like they've been knocked off in a day or two) when another image came to mind: the show of "Artists' Sketchbooks," displayed in table-level vitrines, with which the young dealer Matthew Marks opened his gallery on Madison Avenue last season. Marks exhibited books by artists from Guston to Schnabel (who shows at Pace), and the show, which was given a special charm by the fact that the pages of the sketchbooks were being turned every few days, was a huge hit. (The table-level vitrines full of drawings at Terry Winters's Whitney retrospective may be another spin-off of the Matthew Marks idea.) Then I remembered that Marks had gotten his start at the Pace Gallery, working on the Picasso sketchbook show, and the whole thing began to fall into place.

Picasso is the patriarchal genius of our century, the artist whom all the artists in their forties and fifties grew up thinking of as Daddy—the Daddy who was forever a child, playing in his messy studio. "Je suis le cahier," one of the great shows of the 1980s, seemed to reveal Daddy's secrets even as it compressed his overwhelming achievement into more manageable dimensions. Bernice Rose's "Allegories of Modernism" is a show about the 1980s—about the art stars whose achievements bulked up in those years, about all the artists who wanted to be Daddy but couldn't make the grade. Doesn't everybody know, even if they're not quite ready to admit it, that the art stars are at best so-so artists? Bernice Rose has used the idea of the sketchbook show as a way of compressing all those hulking ambitions into a cutdown form that can, perhaps, pass more easily into history. At "Allegories of Modernism" the jumbo-sized egos are scaled down, are given the sensitive, I'm-just-a-works-on-paper-kind-of-guy-orgal treatment. (Having a few hulking paintings included keeps it all from looking *too* sensitive.) There are surely artists who prefer the Picasso of "Je suis le cahier" to the Picasso of the Modern's 1980 retrospective: in the sketchbook show one wasn't confronted with Daddy's masterworks but was instead allowed to sneak through his personal effects. By turning the art stars of the 1980s into sensitive draftsmen and draftswomen, Bernice Rose expects to humanize them, so that we'll feel that we're sneaking through their personal effects even as they get a chance to audition every one of their damn doodles for the annals of twentieth-century art.

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Theater

Schiller & other exhumations

by Donald Lyons

Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) had one great dramatic theme: the birth pangs of liberal, enlightened, Protestant, nationalistic, modern Europe out of the womb of repressive, Catholic, absolutist tyranny. With differing inflections and emphases and granted a certain largeness of statement, this theme may be said to animate *The Robbers*, *Don Carlos*, *Mary Stuart*, *Maid of Orleans*, *Wallenstein*, and *William Tell*. This interest of Schiller's can be misread as narrow advocacy of German nationalism, but his concern, for all the fervid patriotism, was larger; he wanted an Enlightened Europe.

Schiller has had the misfortune of being a school classic in Germany and elsewhere. His unrelenting nobility of purpose, his prolixity and pomposity of diction (Goethe had a coarser vein of popular humor), have made many a pupil groan. In a way, Americans, whose schools are saddled nowadays with far worse horrors than boring nobleness, are ripe consumers for Schiller, whose *Mary Stuart* (1800) was just done at the Jean Cocteau Repertory. And Schiller was a cleverer dramatist than I may have made him sound. He knew not merely to side with the victors. He learned from Shakespeare to humanize the heavies. His first triumph in this line was King Philip in *Don Carlos*, and in *Mary Stuart* he created an Elizabeth and a Mary in sympathetic equipoise, yielding, if anything, too much to Mary, especially in her extended final monotonous pathos. But he was not a sentimentalist, like lesser dramatists of this material; he sees that Mary has to go, but keeps putting off her going. His Elizabeth is a woman of reason undermined by fear, anger, and jealousy. In Schiller's ahistorical innovation, Elizabeth consents to meet Mary (it is the play's climactic scene), who is warned to be on her best behavior but cannot, under provocation, resist calling Elizabeth a bastard and a usurper. Thenceforward, her fate is fixed, only its mechanics uncertain.

But if Schiller studied Shakespeare for complexity of characterization, he brought from Racine the convention that virtually everyone had to be involved in a round robin of amorous intrigue. Whatever else was going on politically or militarily, A had to love B, who loved C, who in turn loved A. Most scandalously, Schiller has his Joan of Arc fall for an English officer in mid-battle in *Maid of Orleans*. In *Mary Stuart*, all the devious erotic obsessions liven things up agreeably, mitigating the drearier stretches of religiosity. Young Mortimer, nephew of Mary's Protestant jailer, seems to hate but in fact loves Mary. He was converted to Catholicism on a visit to Saint Peter's by all the music and art and costumes, realizing the folly of "reason." (Schiller trying to be fair to baroque Counter-Reformation Catholicism is touching; less so is some later nonsense about priests preforgiving murder.) Mad for Mary, Mortimer pretends to accept Elizabeth's commission to assassinate her: "False deceitful queen, / As you delude the

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world, even so I cozen you." Also secretly smitten with Mary is Leicester, Elizabeth's favorite. The play's women are in fact considerably less love-besotted than the men: Mary *uses* her admirers but seems to have spent her passion in her scandalous salad days; Elizabeth does envy Mary's winning ways with males but is far more concerned with how to get rid of her without actually having to sign a public death warrant.

The best scene in the play, along with the collision of the queens, is the debate at Elizabeth's court about what to do about Mary. One adviser, Cecil, urges death. Another, Shrewsbury, urges mercy, adducing Mary's troubled childhood as excuse for her criminality. A third, the beloved Leicester, waffles, first opting for death but then desiring life, but only on the pragmatic grounds of Mary's impotence for further evil. The English queen hesitates. It is superb—like a debate in Thucydides. In the same vein, Leicester later counsels Elizabeth to meet Mary, saying, "She asks it as a favor; grant it as a punishment." At the play's end, by the way, Cecil is banished for doing exactly what the queen wanted; Shrewsbury resigns in disgust; false Leicester flees to France—all made up, but who cares?

The Cocteau production, directed by Casey Kizziah, used period costumes and a mode of stiff, solemn rhetorical declamation. Nothing was modernized in the slightest, and one would like to endorse this eschewing of gimmickry and recommend that JoAnne Akalaitis, who superintends the Public Theater nearby, check it out. But truth compels one to admit that the monotonous oratory of the Cocteau production did begin to pall after a while. One began to wish for . . . not perhaps Charles Ludlam, but some source of pep. But within the chosen hieratic style good work was done. Angela Vitale, beruffed and bepearled à la Bette Davis, made a nervously intelligent Elizabeth, who would not do the thing that she would do. In traditional black dress and wimple, Elise Stone's Mary was a statuesque one, with the word's good connotations of beauty and strength as well as the less good ones of unanimatedness and immobility. Mary's stab at sexiness seemed a wrong note, though; Schiller calls for her to go to her death in white with bound hair, while Mary here suddenly steps forward in a va-va-voom red dress with hair undone (I thought of Maggie Smith's great comic moment of revelation in *Lettice & Lovage*). Were they going for a tableau of baroque, Berninesque sexuality? If so, it was insufficiently clear—and so looked, in the indefiniteness, merely a muddle. Among the men, Craig Smith's Cecil and Joseph Menino's Shrewsbury were solid, while Mark Westerman's Leicester energetically negotiated his complex allegiances. Best was Grant Neele's passionate, hot-headed Mortimer, full of life.

The new verse translation by Robert David MacDonald seemed, to my ears, a lightly reworked and updated retread of the blank-verse version by Joseph Mellish, a contemporary and friend of Schiller's. MacDonald depoeticizes without importing any new verse or prose life. Lines like "A grim presentiment runs through my heart" or "Would she dare send a royal head in ignominy to the block?" are neither old fish nor new fowl. The Cocteau would have done better sticking to the Mellish, which still reads quite well.

JoAnne Akalaitis has not heeded my advice. Her production of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, an incest melodrama of *c.* 1630, at the Public Theater is nothing if not replete with facile gimmickry. One of her two governing bright ideas is to set the thing in the Fascist Italy of the early 1930s. Thus, characters from time to time exchange Fascist salutes and mutter something about "Il Duce"; a few sport period military uniform; girl scouts wheel out a neon sign proclaiming "Dio Patria Famiglia." But the Fascistification is half-hearted and fitful. What really gets Miss Akalaitis's juices flowing is the other gimmick—Surrealism. Stage right is dominated by a mobile Chirico-esque portico; the backdrop is a Tanguy-like sky alive with blobs. In one

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scene, a Man Ray photograph, called "Tears," of a woman's face with an artificial drop near her eye, reposes atop a pillar; in later scenes, four identical large photographs of a kneeling rearview nude dot the playing area. But these Surrealist props, while perhaps less familiar than the veneer of Fascism (which has become a weary cliché in the theater in the half-century since the Mercury Theatre originated it), are in the end no more successful as a principle of artistic coherence in this *'Tis Pity*. For Surrealism was not, after all, décor; it set out to pictorialize the unconscious, to unsettle and unnerve and frighten by violent imagistic yokings-together. It may, to be sure, have fallen prey to the chi-chi and the facile, but it had, to a point, a serious psychic agenda. Miss Akalaitis uses the surface vocabulary of Surrealism to mask her lack of an agenda. The *Times* critic lauded the "artistry of the feminist statement" in the production, remarking that this is "one of those evenings when you leave the theater convinced that the director must have rewritten the text, for how could a work with language so frank and nasty and sexual politics so sophisticated have been written almost four centuries ago?" (The Ford text, while essentially trashy, is not so absurdly topical as Frank Rich makes it sound here.)

In fact, though, what the contradictory Akalaitis stylizings convey is not a feminist manifesto but a nervous fear of emotion—except for the easy emotion of revulsion. Thus, evil revelers are made to march and gesticulate like spastic marionettes; bad guys banquet in black tie at what looks like a fashionable sushi bar. Neon . . . chrome . . . the cold . . . the void—Akalaitis likes these tones (one remembers the final, kingly apparition of Hal in her *Henry IV 2*, where these tones worked). The play's comic figures, weak enough in Ford in the first place, are made to belittle the very idea of humor; they strike poses out of silent comedy not to get laughs but to manifest the ugliness and maladroitness of bad actors trying to get laughs. Laughter is somehow immoral in the Akalaitis universe. The throbbing, one-note music is generic avant-garde minatoriness. Alas for the feminist statement, the play's women are a grim lot: a luridly vengeful vixen (played with brio by Ellen McElduff); an amoral and stupid confidante (overcooked by Deirdre O'Connell); and a heroine, Annabella, who has been described by one commentator as "virtually a moral defective." Jeanne Tripplehorn does impart a sweetness and tenderness to this figure. But this is a text that gives slippery purchase to propagandists.

The language is a virtual pastiche of Shakespeare. The besotted brother, Giovanni, says to his sister:

> Thus hung Jove on Leda's neck
> And sucked divine ambrosia from her lips.
> I envy not the mightiest man alive,
> But hold myself in being king of thee
> More great than were I king of all the world.
> But I shall lose you, sweetheart.

We seem to be hearing a comic-book version of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Merchant of Venice*. When Annabella says,

> there's but a dining-time
> 'Twixt us and our confusion: let's not waste
> These precious hours in vain and useless
> speech,

a simplified *Measure for Measure* echoes. And here is Giovanni about to slay, abort, and remove the heart from his sister:

> Be dark, bright sun,
> And make the midday night, that thy gilt rays
> May not behold a deed will turn their
> splendour
> More sooty than the poets feign their Styx.
> One more kiss, sister.

Othello is bubbling beneath these lines. Actually, however, Ford's true note seems closer to the megalomaniacal bravado of Christopher Marlowe than to anything in Shakespeare. *'Tis Pity* is a not untypical period piece of Italianate farrago spiced with the sensational "hook" of incest. Eliot made

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a telling comparison: "We see clearly why Antony and Cleopatra find each other congenial, and we see their relation, during the course of the play, become increasingly serious. But Giovanni is merely selfish and self-willed, of a temperament to want a thing the more because it is forbidden; Annabella is pliant, vacillating and negative."

Almost paradoxically, the best things in this Akalaitis version are two male performances. Jared Harris, whose mannerisms jarred as Hotspur and as Pistol in Akalaitis's *Henry IV*, here found an appropriate outlet for his skewed posturings and accents in the role of Annabella's cruel and violent husband. Val Kilmer, a film star, takes Giovanni quite seriously, quite at his own valuation, as a kind of hiphop Hamlet. Kilmer clearly relishes Giovanni's scholastic quibblings about incest with a slow-witted Friar and brings a forcefully self-absorbed mixture of sophistry and craziness to the amorous siege and to the later murder of his sister. As she did with Hal, Akalaitis spares her puppyish hero any of the distorting stylization lavished on the extras. This laissez-faire indulgence of Kilmer may be artistically illogical, but it does at least let sound one note of (to be sure, perverted) humanity in the bowels of the clanking machine that is her *'Tis Pity*.

Sight Unseen, a new play by Donald Margulies at the Manhattan Theatre Club, deals with the painter as celebrity. Jonathan Waxman has hit it big: he's hired a PR firm; he's been profiled in *Vanity Fair* and the *Times*; he presells unpainted canvases to the Japanese; now he's having his first big London show. Two of the play's eight scenes (they occur in jumbled chronological order) take place at the London gallery, where a prim German TV interviewer needles Waxman about the content of his signature painting. It is called *Walpurgisnacht 1986* and depicts a black man atop a white woman, her fists clenched, in a Jewish cemetery whose graves have been spray-painted with swastikas. Pressed about the Jewishness of the work, he explodes in a tirade about philistine museumgoers ignoring Van Gogh to get to the gift shop (the relevance of this easy and trite indignation was not clear) and then, accusing the woman of "Jew-baiting," stalks off. But the play spends most of its time on a visit made by Waxman to an English farm four days before the London opening. His old lover and muse Patricia lives there now, doing archeology and married to a dour English archeologist who knows all about Waxman and oozes sardonic, Pinteresque menace. Waxman has come both to make amends for his angry dismissal of Patricia fifteen years back and to buy back a key early Waxman painting of Patricia that is hanging in the farmhouse. Patricia plods around in boots washing and slicing veggies and setting tables and making cutting cracks about Waxman's celebrity. She too has a question about *Walpurgisnacht 1986*; she wants to know if the woman's clenched fists indicate that she is being raped. Waxman waffles. But basically Patricia has retreated far from Waxman's world into vegetables and shards. Waxman pleads for the Patricia painting: "I've lost my way; there's a kind of fury in this painting I must get back." She treasures it in a sense ("I never felt so alive as when I sat naked for you") but agrees, with the bizarre husband's enthusiastic concurrence, to part with it for a nice sum. And then there are two flashback scenes to Patricia and Waxman's student days in New York: on the day they meet he is reluctant to sleep with her because she is not Jewish; on the day his mother dies he excludes her from the mourning and his life.

Sight Unseen was well performed, with the right mix of guarded intensity, circling wariness, and profound bitterness, by Dennis Boutsikaris as Waxman and Deborah Hedwall as Patricia. Jon de Vries went over the top with the husband's elephantine idiosyncrasies.

But the play amounts to precious little. The glib and finally unrewarding juggling with the scenes' chronology could not long distract from the mediocrity of the content. It was like an episode, and not one of the

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better-written ones, of "Thirtysomething," in which, say, a Frank Stella or Julian Schnabel kind of guy pops in on the married Hope, whom he loved and sketched at Penn: she goes up to the attic and gets him that cherished sketch; husband Michael somehow knows. The visitor admits that, for all his success, he misses that "fury" in the dormitory. "Thirtysomething," after all, like *Sight Unseen*, was not above drawing on "The Aspern Papers" and "The Dead."

While Mr. Margulies clearly knows the art *world*, it is not so clear if he has anything interesting to say about *art*. *Walpurgisnacht 1986*, a teasing but unlearned allusion to Anselm Kiefer or Eric Fischl, is just a gimmick to introduce titillatingly shocking topics; the Patricia painting evokes, if anything, Andrew Wyeth and not serious art. Waxman seems more a Judith Krantz than a Henry James idea of an artist, more a Stassinopoulos than a Richardson version of a painter. Mr. Margulies appears not to have thought through Waxman's Judaism at all: the painting confronts anti-Semitism, but why then does Waxman bristle at this fact? If Waxman is going to make an issue of not bedding shiksas, why then does he do it? It is all just left irritatingly dangling. More than irritatingly—irresponsibly, for these are issues too serious to serve as mere ballast for a half-baked script. And finally, whatever his inwardness with art, Mr. Margulies is out of his depth in archeological strata. Patricia speaks of a "*late medieval* rubbish dump" where "I sift through piles of *ancient* rubbish every day" (my emphases). I have just enough fondness for *Sight Unseen* to resist telling Patricia that, if she tossed her script onto that ill-assorted dump, she could add a layer of postmodern rubbish.

Another new play involving archeologists is John Guare's *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun* at the Vivian Beaumont. It is a one-act family drama about two archeologists welcoming their nine children (all from earlier marriages) to their cherished summer dig in Sicily. Guare is peerless in writing parent-child confrontations (they were perhaps the best thing in *Six Degrees of Separation*). Here the parents are pantingly eager to share their magical place; they have set up an "archeological Easter egg hunt"; they carefully explain their Cretan dig as resembling an "incredibly delicate lasagna"—how good Guare can be at twisting the shapes of everyday life into wit and point! The kids, of course, are at first whiny, ornery, resistant, recalcitrant. Until the eldest boy, thirteen, and the eldest girl, thirteen, become infected by the genius loci and try love. Until the eldest boy takes his new monicker of Icarus (all the kids have been given mythological names for the summer) literally. Until, in short, "The Brady Bunch" tries to turn into *Hippolytus*. Guare's second-time-lucky married lovers ask, "Is there a moment when our lives are mythic, touched by grace, and we start again?" Guare brings these bright and appealing people into touch with the numinous, whose awesome power can exalt or annihilate with impartial insouciance. At the end, all but a few characters shrink from contact with the divine. These few are left uncomprehendingly, unseeingly adoring the sun, like the eyeless sculpted baboons "in the Louvre" that the parents revere.

One wants to like a Guare play. Civilized irony is, after all, a treat. And here one is happy in the company of the charming, intelligent, and touching Stockard Channing and James Naughton as the parents. But *Baboons* remains a sketch—and a sketch in an archly Edwardian, E. M. Forsterian, ah-the-power-of-the-gods mode. Mr. Guare has found no way to bridge the gap between familial naturalism and melodramatic supernaturalism. So he has to resort to such desperate devices as a superintending sprite clad in satyresque tights and called Eros and given to chanting calypso wisdom, an earthquake, a volcano, metamorphosed statues, a great blinding sun disk. And precisely what is weakest in Guare has served to stimulate director Peter Hall, whose loudly intrusive impressionism cannot blind us to the gaps in the dramaturgy. It is not, in principle, necessarily a bad idea to blend the quotidian

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Menander with the demonic Euripides, but this script has been taken out of the oven before it has had a chance to cook properly.

Death and the Maiden, by Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman, is at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre in a production directed by Mike Nichols and starring Glenn Close, Richard Dreyfuss, and Gene Hackman. Set at the "beach house" of Gerardo (Dreyfuss) and Paulina (Close) in "probably" Chile, the play brings a neighbor, Dr. Roberto (Hackman), to the house to return a spare tire to Gerardo only to be tied up and abused and threatened with death by Paulina, who is convinced she recognizes Roberto as her sadistic, Schubert-playing (hence the title), Nietzsche-quoting torturer/rapist years back in the dungeons of a Pinochet-like regime—and all this on the very day when distinguished lawyer Gerardo has been appointed by the new democratic President of the country to a Commission to investigate the abuses perpetrated by the former dictatorship. Gerardo, flummoxed by his wife's behavior but hogtied by his own guilt because of adultery, pleads with her to let the law take its course in dealing with the possibly innocent doctor. She scorns the mere law: "The judges? The same judges who never intervened to save one life in seventeen years of dictatorship? Who never accepted a single *habeas corpus* ever?" The story of *Death and the Maiden* is thus preposterously silly.

And the English of Ariel Dorfman never rides above this clumsily expository sawdust. Come on, Paulina, wouldn't your husband already know how many years the dictatorship lasted? But it often sinks below it into profanity, as Paulina compulsively rehearses the coarse obscenities she believes herself to have heard in captivity from the lips of Roberto. There is, too, much talk of Schubert's being soiled by having been the favorite composer of a monster. This trite trope of twentieth-century torture is in no way refreshed or re-examined in the hands of Mr. Dorfman. And in the event, Paulina does not put Roberto on trial at all, and thus the climax to which the dramaturgy has seemed to be building does not occur. She merely forces him at gunpoint to write a confession, which her husband may or may not have supplied. Then, despite her word, she puts the gun to his head. "They freeze in their positions as the lights begin to go down slowly." There is an epilogue of sorts in which Gerardo delivers a lengthy, high-minded oration on the Final Report of the Commission to a packed concert hall in which Roberto may or may not be present (he could be a hallucination of Paulina's).

Unresolved ontological and epistemological questions accumulate until we seem to be in the world of Pirandello. But these uncertainties are mere bluff, for Mr. Dorfman's play by its emotional weight sides with Paulina as against the petty, flawed, male legalism of Gerardo and the (at best) slimy equivocations of Roberto/Mengele. Mr. Dorfman is Arthur Miller pretending to be Pirandello. But I can only say, after suffering through the tax-form deadness of Mr. Dorfman's language and the loaded ineptness of his dramaturgy, "Come back, Arthur Miller, all is forgiven."

Mike Nichols has been taken to task by critics for trivializing a powerful script with a glossy set and three preening movie stars. Yes, it felt like a Malibu hideaway complete with stucco walls, softly billowing, ceiling-to-floor curtains, and the (imagined?) susurration of the surf without. Yes, the three stars played it like a particularly leaden and absurd Joan Crawford psychodrama (with, say, Van Heflin and Raymond Massey). But to my view these Nichols touches were at least rouge on the corpse.

I shall, finally, be eager to learn of any productions of *Death and the Maiden*, with its implicit but urgent call for vengeance on agents of tyranny, in the former Soviet Empire. Or perhaps in Havana?

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Books

Song of himself: Harold Bloom on God

by Marc M. Arkin

Once a Romantic, always a Romantic. Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University as well as Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Professor of English at New York University, was at one time a literary critic with a special interest in Romanticism. In his new book, *The American Religion*,[1] he attempts to do for American religion what he once did for literature: rewrite it with himself as the hero. In pursuit of this Romantic calling, Professor Bloom argues that there is such a thing as an American Religion and that it transcends all denominational barriers. According to Bloom, American Religion is defined not by a distinctive theology but by the unmediated experience of the self as God. The "American finds God in herself or himself," he writes, a feat accomplished "only after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude." In this solitary freedom, the American is liberated both from other selves and from the created world. He comes to recognize that his spirit is itself uncreated. Knowing that he is the equal of God, the American Religionist can then achieve his true desideratum, mystical communion with his friend, the godhead.

For Bloom, gnosticism unites with American exceptionalism to yield an American Religion that finds God not in nature but in the divine spark within the yeoman farmer: a sort of manifest destiny of the oversoul. Quite clearly, this version of American religion does not describe Sunday services at your local mainline Protestant church. Indeed, to find a methodology equal to his insight, Bloom must slip the traces of traditional disciplines and develop a new genre, one which, in deference to his previous profession as a literary critic, he baptizes "religious criticism." Just as Bloomian literary criticism elevates itself to the level of the works of literature it explores, so religious criticism turns out to be a species of self-deification.

The difficulty with such a novel discipline, if "discipline" be a fair word, is that, like the Bloomian religion itself, it seems to be subject to none of the traditional constraints. Admitting that he is not "a historian or a sociologist or a psychologist of religion, let alone a theologian," Bloom instead qualifies himself as a religious critic by explaining that he is an "unbelieving Jew of strong Gnostic tendencies." Even while likening religious criticism to literary criticism—both are said to be based on a core aesthetic element—Bloom points out that religious criticism is freed from such limiting concerns as texts or the relations between texts.

In other words, religious criticism is entirely a projection of the Romantic self, the self of the critic if not of the believer. In this, Bloom owes a substantial debt to his acknowledged precursor, Ralph Waldo Emer-

1 *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, by Harold Bloom; Simon & Schuster, 288 pages, $22.

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son, another in the long line of Romantic egoists. For Bloom, the quintessential document of American religious criticism is Emerson's Divinity School Address, in which we are assured at length that man's "being is without bound" and that "if a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God." The rub of course is that religious criticism on this model is apt to tell us a great deal more about the critic than about religion, a problem that Bloom has cheerfully embraced as a virtue in his literary analyses. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), for example, he suggested that "there are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry." Whatever value this assertion might have for the critic's ego, it should be a warning to the reader to come armed with substantial doses of salt.

Consider Bloom's search for Gnostic survivals in the American Religion. Gnosticism has become something of a fad in critical circles recently, with Bloom himself having favored the public with a novel subtitled "A Gnostic Fantasy" and generally committing himself to finding Gnosticism under every available bedstead. There is, however, a difference between "Gnosticism" and "gnosticism." The genuine item, Gnosticism, flourished as a species of arcane religious teaching in the Hellenized Near East from about A.D. 80 to 200 and for a time appeared to be giving the nascent Christian churches a serious run for their money. A composite of Christianity, neo-Platonism, and Eastern ideas, Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge") reveled in an extraordinarily baroque cosmology replete with complex hierarchies of divine beings and a radically dualistic outlook.

There are great differences between the surviving teachings of the Gnostic sages, and the surviving Gnostic texts are wildly contradictory. At its most general level, however, Gnosticism tended to teach that the key to salvation rested in a secret knowledge revealed only to the initiated few. Typically, this secret knowledge included the contention that the division separating the human from the divine was an illusion that evaporated with the enlightenment that gnosis brings. Thus, the gnostic adept was invited to believe in his own divinity. Here is the connection to Bloomian "gnosticism," which describes little more than a general belief that there is a god within and that the essence of religion rests in the direct experience of that divine spark.

Now, the desire to become God—to bridge the gulf between creator and created—is as old as Lucifer himself. While Bloom is a tiny bit shy about suggesting that Gnosticism—pleroma, kenoma, archons, demiurges, and all—has survived into the present, he is perfectly willing to find gnosticism persisting in all manner of religious phenomena, from Mormonism to African religions. This leads him greatly to understate the role that mainline denominations, with their staid traditions of theology and their developed institutional lives, have played in American religious life, and to concentrate instead on more exotic efflorescences. Thus, he focuses in turn on Mormonism, Christian Science, Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostalism, and the Fundamentalist wing of Southern Baptism, with brief nods at such assorted phenomena as New Age religion and snake handling. In fact, it seems as if, like any true Romantic, Bloom is intoxicated by the sheer strangeness of the religious phenomena he studies. He is wrapped in an uncritical admiration for their most extravagant stances, mistaking the extremes of religiosity for a life-affirming force.

This fascination with the picturesque leads Bloom virtually to ignore denominations with substantial intellectual traditions. The United Church of Christ (formerly the Congregationalists), the Presbyterians, and the Lutherans, not to mention the Catholic Church in America: each receives scant attention from Bloom. Similarly, Bloom's preoccupation with American exceptionalism leads him to downplay the links between such movements as European pietism and English Puritanism and American religious life. As a rhetorical device, it is quite

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provocative to say that the American Religion was born at the Great Camp Meeting at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801, a meeting in which multitudes were converted to evangelical religion with such attendant phenomena as the "barks," the "jerks," the "falling exercise," the "singing exercise," and other indicia of religious excitement. But where does this leave the American revival tours of the great eighteenth century English evangelist George Whitefield, whose preaching on the Boston Common to crowds as large as thirty thousand in 1740 had much the same effect? And where does this leave the more sedate but equally influential belief of the early Boston Congregationalists, that church membership was limited to those individuals who could relate a saving work of grace in their own souls —the very conversion experience that so discomfited twentieth-century Americans when described by our thirty-ninth president, the Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter? Without these antecedents, Cane Ridge makes no sense—unless you believe in historical causation by miasma, a process that at times does seem to reflect Bloom's approach.

A case in point is Bloom's discussion of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism and the ultimate self-created American. Bloom describes Smith as a "religious genius," an authentic American prophet and a great "creative misreader" of the Bible. According to Bloom, "so strong was [Smith's] act of reading that it broke through all the orthodoxies . . . and found its way back to elements that Smith rightly intuited had been censored out of the stories of the archaic Jewish religion." Moreover, Bloom suggests that the "God of Joseph Smith is a daring revival of the God of some of the Kabbalists and Gnostics." Weaving together Smith's personal obsession with the patriarch Enoch, who was taken up by God and so did not experience death, and the Kabbalistic texts in which Enoch is transmogrified into the angel Metatron, Bloom at one and the same time admits that Smith was unlikely to have had access to this esoteric tradition and manages to imply that he did.

Out of all this, Bloom whips up a tale every bit as imaginative as those of the Prophet Joseph. According to Bloom, once Smith had recaptured the authentic biblical view of theomorphic man, his genius inevitably led to the restoration of patriarchal plural marriage. Warming to the subject, Bloom begins by explaining that Smith sought "to bring about in the spiritual realm what the American Revolution had inaugurated in the sociopolitical world," the abolition of hierarchies. Plural marriage was to be the means of abolishing one particular hierarchy, the separation of divine from human by means of what Bloom terms theurgic sexuality. Never mind that at least one Mormon leader felt called upon to ask in a sermon, "Did the Prophet Joseph want every man's wife he asked for?" And never mind that plural marriage did a great deal to reinforce at least one hierarchy, that subsisting between men and women. Ignoring such inconveniences, Bloom explains that "male nature being polygamous, the restoration of all things demanded a sanctification of polygamy, rather than an abolishment of a nature that could not be corrected." Deadpan, Bloom opines that Smith's putative eighty-four "marriages" in the three years before his murder testify to the "high seriousness" of Smith's quest. Serious, indeed! According to Bloom, polygamy was essential to Smith's prophetic nature. And, *mirabile dictu*, it seems to be essential to the nature of religious critics and other (male) mortals as well, since according to Bloom America became "a country in which prophecy had ceased" when Mormon polygamy was banned.

Perhaps this sympathy for the Mormon approach to male sexual energy explains the short shrift that Bloom gives another genuine American prophet, Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. Although Bloom dismisses Eddy as a "confused" dualist presenting her science as monism, Eddy was in fact every bit as much a religious innovator as Smith. She, too, broke

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with contemporary orthodoxy to claim that her distinctive vision of the cosmos was an authoritative revelation. No less than Smith, Eddy claimed the status of a prophet or even more, sometimes implying that she was the sister of Jesus come to complete the divine revelation. A fairly sizeable number of her contemporaries apparently agreed with her, as anyone who has ever visited the opulent Mother Church in Boston can attest. What Bloom—following Mark Twain and Edwin Franden Dakin—finds laughable in a housewife from Lynn, Massachusetts, is heroic in a farmer's son from upper New York State.

Eddy's vision includes the ideas that God is all and that man is a divine reflection of God, that the world of the senses is unreal, mere "belief," and that matter and death are "mortal illusions" which may be overcome by a right mental attitude. All this places her squarely within the gnostic camp. Despite this affinity, Bloom is repelled by Eddy, partly because of her numerous personal foibles but also because of what he perceives as her horror at the idea of an anthropomorphic God and her rejection of the sacral role of sexuality. In fact, one of Eddy's most authentic religious innovations was her exploration of a god that embodied both male and female characteristics, even while she was also venturing upon arguably less felicitous doctrinal innovations such as her belief in parthenogenesis.

Nevertheless, throughout this book Bloom exercises the religious critic's privilege to play favorites with no particular rhyme or reason. He ridicules Eddy's literary style in *Science and Health*, demonstrating little more than his own preference for the parody of the King James style in Mormon texts over the parody of the style of Mrs. Felicia Hemans, the great nineteenth-century sentimentalist, in Christian Science texts. He accuses Mrs. Eddy of plagiarism, of pilfering the works of Thomas Carlyle, while ignoring scholarly research on the sources of the Book of Mormon. He makes light of Eddy's claim to a place in the spiritual pantheon next to Jesus and the Virgin Mary at the same time that he celebrates the audacious vision that permitted Joseph Smith to have himself crowned King of Heaven before his death.

The greatest challenge to the cogency of Bloom's vision of American religion arises in his treatment of the Southern Baptist Convention, a group that he suggests will, along with the Mormons, be at the center of American religious life in the twenty-first century. Bloom's historical account of the growth of the Southern Baptist Church is bewildering at best. Although Bloom has told us that American Religion begins with Cane Ridge, in the case of the Baptists he makes an exception. He concedes that it is impossible to understand their history without understanding its point of origin in Roger Williams, the colonial divine expelled from Massachusetts Bay to Rhode Island because of his deviant religious views and who there founded the first Baptist church in the colonies. Yet within a few pages, Bloom has traced American Baptism back to the Baptist Churches of England, discounted any real influence for Williams, and called the rise of Southern Baptism "apparently arbitrary."

Granted, the history of Baptism is complex, but as Bloom himself later suggests, the rapid spread of Baptism through the South was due primarily to its ability to exist without an educated ministry in rural or frontier areas. In this, Bloom follows the lead of the late Sydney Ahlstrom, the distinguished student of American religion who some years ago explained that the great Baptist innovation was the farmer-preacher. Converted in a revival or by an itinerant evangelist, farmers would feel the call, begin to preach, gather a church around them, and be ordained by their own church, all the while supporting themselves by their own farm labor without financially draining their congregation. The inevitable effect of the farmer-preacher was to stress experience over doctrine as the denomination spread.

Bloom finds the apotheosis of this Baptist experiential tradition in the writings of Edgar Young Mullins, president of Southern Theological Seminary for nearly forty

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years and the leading theologian of his denomination during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Mullins did, indeed, stress the primacy of religious experience. Ultimately, he subordinated all other Christian doctrines to his belief in "the soul's competency in religion." Despite his focus on the soul's direct relation to God, however, Mullins was conventionally orthodox, and his writings were informed by fairly standard Reformed positions on the general doctrines of Christian theology, such as the nature of sin and the effect of the atonement. Given this, one requires great expertise in creative misreading to fit Mullins into the gnostic tradition that Bloom concocts for him.

Moreover, this most "vital and original" version of the American Religion is itself being displaced by Fundamentalism within the Southern Baptist Convention, and nothing in Bloom's critical vision adequately equips him to understand this event. After all, if Mullinsite Baptists represent the true flowering of the American Religion, why are they losing ground to a group that Bloom himself describes as "Know-Nothings"? Bloom's attempt to salvage his view of American Religion by depicting the moderates and the Fundamentalists as modes of the same "deepest subjectivity" is simply unconvincing. Bloom's distaste for the anti-intellectualism of some manifestations of Fundamentalism is understandable, as is his comparison of the Fundamentalist insistence on scriptural "inerrancy" to the equally disturbing imperatives of the politically correct "rabblement of lemmings who now dominate American campuses." It is unclear, however, why the Fundamentalist Baptists are any less attractive than Fundamentalist Pentecostals such as Jimmy Swaggert, a figure whom Bloom finds at worst amusing and at best an example of Kabbalistic redemption through sinning. More important, Bloom is hamstrung by his own critical apparatus—his lack of tragic vision—from addressing the most perplexing question to those firmly anchored in the modern intellectual tradition: namely, what is the spiritual appeal of Fundamentalism?

What Bloom seems temperamentally incapable of appreciating is that Fundamentalism bears witness to H. Richard Niebuhr's indictment of a liberal American church in which "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." Niebuhr's aphorism reflects the conviction that liberal religion has lost sight of a critical aspect of the gospel message: the need for redemption from sin through atonement. A view farther from gnosticism is hard to imagine. Thus, it is only by means of a peculiarly strong misreading that Bloom can argue that Fundamentalists seek to find the uncreated self within each adherent. It may be poetically entertaining to read that "the Fundamentalists, as unwitting Gnostics, do not believe anyway that God made *them*," or that "what wounds them unforgivingly is not the idea of evolution . . . but the demonstration that they were never God, or part of God." Such claims have nothing to do with the actual doctrines or beliefs of Fundamentalism.

Bloom's final spasm of critical intuition—his prediction that American Religion will follow the paradigm of the Black Church—is especially audacious. He focuses on African survivals in the Black Churches, finding in them both the source of much of what is already distinctive in American evangelical practice and a model for its future. While no serious student of American religion would deny the crucial influence of the black religious experience on Christian America, Bloom's approach stretches even his considerable analogic powers. He begins by admitting that nothing could be further from gnosticism than the black sacred cosmos. But he then announces that the African belief that every object and person has its spiritual twin, "the little man within," demonstrates that Africans believed that there was an uncreated true self within each person, a vision "strangely parallel to apsects of ancient Gnosticism . . . [which] may well be the tap-root of concepts of the spirit in the American Religion." From here it is but a

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short leap to the proposition that "the early African-American Baptists may have declined to distinguish between the little man or woman within each one of them and the figure of the resurrected Jesus. Out of this emerged the particular African-American Baptist rhetoric of Jesus as friend, a rhetoric without which white Southern Baptist religion would not have been possible." As lawyers say, *res ipsa loquitur*, the thing speaks for itself.

G. K. Chesterton once said that "America is a nation with the soul of a church." We are, to use Bloom's phrase, a "religion-soaked, even religion-mad" society. Statistics show, we are told, that 88 percent of Americans believe that God loves them personally, approximately 20 percent that God speaks directly to them. At least since the time of Alexis de Tocqueville, foreign visitors have been fascinated by the role that religion plays in our public life despite the absence of an established church. *The American Religion* is a domestic manifestation of this same fascination with the religious life of Americans. But its author might have been well advised to heed the advice of Niebuhr. Speaking of the kingdom of God in America, Niebuhr told his readers, "we need to seek the pattern within it, not to superimpose some other pattern upon it. The ideal needs to be looked for in the real, not imported from without."

What was the question?

Margaret Drabble The Gates of Ivory. Viking, 464 pages, $22

reviewed by James Bowman

What will happen to champagne socialists now that the Homeland of the Revolution has been exposed as a barren and impoverished dump? Where can limousine liberals look for their model of progressivism now that, for those with any remaining shred of intellectual integrity, collectivist ideology has been utterly discredited? These may not strike you as among the most urgent questions facing mankind in the last decade of the twentieth century, but they are a lot more engaging than most of the unanswered questions posed, in a steady and unrelenting stream, by Margaret Drabble in her new novel, *The Gates of Ivory*.

In fact, the question of what happens now to the fashionable Lefties is one she doesn't ask rhetorically, even though it is the question that lies behind all the enormous number of those she does ask. These concern both her mysterious characters' disappearances into the Cambodian jungle and things in general. Where is Stephen Cox? Where is Sean Flynn? Where is Mitra Akrun? Where is Pol Pot? What has happened to them? Can you believe anything you read in the newspapers? Will the fame of Rimbaud or Rambo last longer? Who is shelling whom on the Cambodian border? Will a Labour government solve London's transport problems? Is this the End of History? Who will win the pennant?

Never has a novel been written so much in the interrogative vein. And to all the questions the answer is the same: Who knows? Who cares? This is a tired book, a monument to intellectual defeat. The reader, having been bombarded for nearly five hundred pages with avowedly unanswerable questions, is left with the impression of everlasting enervation, of boundless banality. The more unvarying the futile interrogation, the more intellectually wearying the artistic experience. Its point is, I know, that it is pointless, but that isn't enough of a point. In the end the whole business comes off as nothing more than a titanic shrug of Miss Drabble's authorial shoulders.

In effect, the book is the *reductio ad absurdum* of point-of-view fiction: instead of some irony-magnet who tells the story in a state of greater or lesser ignorance about its true implications, the author herself is the ignorant narrator. There is no higher authority. It's enough to make you long for the return of the omniscient narrator. For example, at one point she places two of her

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characters in a coffee shop and pretends that she can't quite hear what they are talking about:

> Are they discussing the inflated prices of British Impressionist paintings? Are they planning a trip to the École Française d'Extrême-Orient, or to the Queen of Novara at Pallanza? Are they speaking of Robert's ex-wife Lydia Wittering, who has broken an arm playing polo? Are they speculating about the rumoured arrival of Simon Grunewald? Are either or both of them having an affair with the mysterious woman in white? Are either or both of them thinking of Stephen Cox? . . . Perhaps it *is* Simon Grunewald of whom they speak? Or then again, perhaps not.

Perhaps not indeed! This is infuriating. Why this silly coyness about the creatures of her own imagination? You created these characters, dearie; if you don't know what they are talking about, who does? Why play this tedious guessing game with no right answers when your readers may well have matchbook collections in need of cataloguing?

Unlike Miss Drabble, I shall answer my own questions. The reason is simply this: to express a kind of holy ignorance, which she sees as the only possible response to a violent and bewildering world. Just as art once aimed to play upon our emotions by producing the illusion of knowledge, so now its end seems to be to deaden emotion by producing the illusion of ignorance. And where the emotion *really* has to be deadened, the ignorance must be all-embracing—not only about how a million or two Cambodians came to be murdered but even about what fictitious characters are talking about. It is as if the latter have emerged from the storm-tossed imagination of their creator only to be drowned in their coffee cups.

At any rate, they must be kept at a certain distance, both from her and from us. To Margaret Drabble, people are the sum of what we don't know about them. How else to explain, in the absence of Marxist rationale, what they do to one another? The book begins with the sentence: "This is a novel—if novel it be—about Good Time and Bad Time." The quaintly postmodern double irony in the main sentence distances the author so far from her material that the infantilism of its prepositional appendage scarcely brushes our moral antennae: from so far away it is only to be expected that she can't make out any shapes more distinct than Good Time (London) and Bad Time (Cambodia).

The trouble with this radically Socratic approach is that it leads nowhere. Nor can it be sustained through all the mundanities and troublesome practicalities of a full-length novel. There may be many questions that we can never know the answers to, but no one is going to be able to believe for long that the question of whether or not Esther and Robert Oxenholme are speaking about Simon Grunewald, the man who sleeps with a cannibal maiden on Irian Jaya, is among them. It is all very well to stick a thumb in the eye of Mr. Suspension-of-Disbelief in your opening sentence, but he *will* keep coming back and demanding to know what the characters are talking about. The author only has to listen to them, after all; that's what we pay her for.

It is clear enough that the purpose of this healing, this saving ignorance is to serve as insulation from political disillusionment. The heroine, a fiftyish London psychotherapist and Drabble-surrogate called Liz Headleand, together with her friends and neighbors, tries to understand the wreckage of Southeast Asia in terms that make sense to fashionable Hampstead Leftism. Without Marxist ingenuity to help them, they are not very successful. As a result, Cambodia's state of political chaos becomes the symbol for an impenetrable moral and intellectual chaos. "It is as though that small, expendable country, that hole in the map of the world, were trying to speak to them," Miss Drabble writes. But neither they nor their creator can make out what it is that it is trying to say.

This may be one of the few novels ever published with a bibliography—mainly com-

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posed of left-leaning accounts of post-1973 Southeast Asia but proudly headed by Hannah Arendt's *Burden of Our Time*. Yet its very unusualness makes the scholarly apparatus look a mockery. Somehow it only reinforces the general sense of ignorance and bewilderment. About some peripheral characters engaged in sadomasochistic activities "Liz shakes her head. It is beyond her. Human nature is bizarre. Blood will have blood." But *everything* is beyond her, from the savagery of the Cambodian civil war to what Robert and Esther may be talking about in their coffee shop at Cambridge Circus. It is not surprising, then, that the book ends with a paranoid vision of vengeful armies of lost Cambodians.

Good Time, that is, looks fearfully through its telescope at Bad Time a long way off. But Good Time is still pretty good. Counterpoint to the all-pervasive motif of bewilderment and fruitless questioning is provided by the smugly comfortable lives of a miscellaneous group of upper-middle-class Londoners who have in common friendship with Stephen Cox. Stephen is a novelist who has gone off to Cambodia for no obvious reason and subsequently disappeared, leaving behind a box of possessions among which is a human finger bone and the rough draft of a novel. Somebody in Cambodia (who knows who? who cares?) has sent the box to Liz and she feels it incumbent on her to go find out what happened to Stephen.

Both characters replicate the author's earnest perplexity: they know that Cambodia is important but they don't know why. Liz's shake of the head is as far as we can get in the confrontation with evil, and all that we and they are left with are the comforts of banality. Implicitly, the Drabblite neo-Bloomsburies have finally given up trying to bridge the gap between the world of action and the world of the mind—Only disconnect!—and retreated from the political and intellectual chaos on the Left. Like E. M. Forster himself, their patron saint, they always were much more comfortable in cosy North London than trying to make sense of the world of telegrams and anger.

Ostensibly it is the example of Conrad rather than Forster that is brought before us—and seldom or never without a reference to his "racism." Liz finds that Stephen's fragmentary manuscript is about "a land where the water flows uphill" and a young man traveling up a broad Oriental river "into the heart, she supposed, of darkness." Mind you, this guy is supposed to have won the Booker Prize for a novel about the Paris Commune. Yet apparently he cannot resist the shopworn analogy between Southeast Asia and the Conradian Congo. The images are as tired as the authorial spirit in this book. Little wonder that ferreting out racism promises a pleasant diversion.

All we know about Stephen, who is said to be to the left of Pol Pot, is that his mother didn't love him and that he has, nevertheless, a Hamlet complex. Yorick's skull, as you might expect, makes more than one appearance, and when he takes himself off to the jungle because "there is nothing to keep me here" in London, it is said that "he has nothing to lose. Except his life, except his life, except his life." There are a number of other allusions to *Hamlet*, and to other classic literary works, but there seems to be no pattern about them. Like diagnoses of racism and sexism over the espresso, they provide some intellectual reassurance: one feels safe and at home in the company of readers who recognize both *Hamlet* and racism when they see it.

It is only when he arrives in Cambodia that Stephen/Hamlet decides on a purpose for his journey: he has come, he realizes, to find among the jungle-dwelling rump of the Khmer Rouge the last believer in the *année Zéro*, the socialist hope of a new beginning for mankind—even though it may cost millions of lives. For him it is too late: he is "as a man who has for ever lost his faith, who has come here to the graveyard of his own past." But one of his two companions, a Japanese journalist called Akira, is still a believer in the revolution. "Stephen has recanted, but Akira has not. Akira believes because it is impossible. *Credo quia impossibile est*. Stephen has dwindled into reason."

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Well, you may call it that if you like, and certainly reason should begin with a Socratic profession of ignorance. But it is hard to take such claims seriously when the last we see of Stephen is his attempting to explain in dumb-show to a Cambodian peasant what Global Warming is. This wonderfully comic image is a perfect one for the imaginative abyss that lies between fashionable Hampstead and the nasty realities of the Cambodian jungle. If only one could believe that Miss Drabble saw it that way instead of as a point of solidarity between the two.

I suspect, however, that loss of a sense of humor is one of the unfortunate consequences of writing a book in which all of the characters are intellectuals. I mean *all*. Even the Thai courtesan with the engaging name of Miss Porntip (score one for Margaret D.) is incredibly well-read, having learned all there was to learn from each of the bigwigs to whom she has been mistress. And the Cambodian poster-girl, Mme Savet Akrun, who has lost her son to some unknown but endlessly speculated-about fate in the jungle, works at something called the Khmer Women's Association Centre for Adult Education. Talk about dwindling into reason! There is something offensive in the invention of a suffering Cambodia with the values and concerns of Hampstead.

Can Margaret Drabble really mean it? Or is she having one of her characteristically tiny postmodernist jokes with us? Judge for yourself from this reported conversation, supposed to take place at a college feast at one of Britain's less distinguished universities, in the Drabble-North London idiolect:

> Over the strawberry mousse, the Canadian ethologist is lured on to the subject of herd behaviour, and is quite informative about musk ox, elk, moose, impala, lechwe, sitatunga and wildebeest. He proffers (not too solemnly) the opinion that the more northerly the herd, the more individualistic its members tend to be. Beasts in the Arctic Circle have a much less highly developed collective unconscious than African antelopes, he suggests. Alan asks if this could be a racist remark, and if so, in favour of which geographical zone? Is a powerful collective unconscious perhaps a sign of poorly developed cultural and social organization?

I love that "not too solemnly"—as if there were any other way to proffer such an opinion, or Alan's response to it. At such moments it is almost possible to hope that she sees the absurdity herself.

I cling to that hope. Likewise, when Liz resumes menstruating on her arrival in Hanoi—and so advances the theme of the persistence of nature, that dark force capable of bringing down "the entire male world of communism, Marxist-Leninism, inflation, American imperialism," etc.—we are told that "woman-being, woman-life possess her entirely." And what is this woman-being, woman-life? "Shames and humiliations, triumphs and glories, birth and blood. Let armies fight and die, let peoples starve. She hopes that the seat of her skirt will not be stained when she rises." Now that's got to be self-mocking, right? For if not we are driven to the melancholy conclusion that neither Miss Drabble nor her friends on the trendy Left have learned anything from the mistake of taking themselves so seriously for all these misguided years.

A poet's poet

Donald Justice
A Donald Justice Reader:
Selected Poetry and Prose.
Middlebury College Press/
University Press of New England,
171 pages, $17.95

reviewed by Dana Gioia

In 1975 I took a course at Harvard from Elizabeth Bishop. Her general popularity at that moment can be measured by the size of her class; enrollment totaled five students. Although Bishop had won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, she was considered a "poet's poet," a writer treasured by

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fellow artists but not much noted by critics, and hardly known at all by the common reader. Today Bishop's reputation stands as high as that of any American poet of the last forty years. She is perhaps the only major poet of her generation on whom academic critics and non-specialists can enthusiastically agree. But back then a coterie sustained her modest *succès d'estime.*

Today Donald Justice occupies a similar position in American poetry. He is our most notable "poet's poet," with all the ambiguities that bittersweet honorific implies. He has won most of the major awards—the Lamont, the Pulitzer, the Bollingen. His work appears in all the anthologies edited by poets, but it remains conspicuously absent in most of those compiled by professors. He is widely regarded as the most influential poetry-writing teacher now alive. His former students from Iowa, Syracuse, Gainesville, and Bread Loaf constitute a *Who's Who* of American poetry. They include writers in every aesthetic camp. Since his didactic emphasis has been on craft, concentration, and precision, he has founded no school of poetry. Consequently, his work has attracted almost no attention from academic critics. Yet he is one of the few living writers whose verses American poets are likely to quote from memory.

A Donald Justice Reader presents the author's own selection from the work of four decades. Two general observations must be made about this superb volume. First, it is surely notable that so much of Justice's best work can fit into such a modest-sized book. His published oeuvre is remarkably—indeed regrettably—small. Second, it is equally notable how substantial this thin volume seems. His work gives the impression of weight, breadth, and variety. How does Justice manage this paradoxical accomplishment? Like Bishop (or Larkin, to cross the Atlantic for a parallel), he writes on such a consistently high level that he makes every poem, story, or essay matter.

Rereading the poems, one grows so lost in admiration for what they do well that it is easy to forget how much they do not attempt. There are no long poems in the Justice canon—not only no epics but also no narratives of even moderate length, extended meditations, verse memoirs, or dramas. There is not even a lyric sequence longer than a few pages. His medium is the short poem, usually of forty lines or less. One might say that he has spent his life perfecting that medium, but his mastery was there from the beginning. In his first book, *The Summer Anniversaries* (1960), one finds a dozen poems as exquisite as "On the Death of Friends in Childhood," a six-line wonder:

> We shall not ever meet them bearded in heaven,
> Nor sunning themselves among the bald of hell;
> If anywhere, in the deserted schoolyard at twilight,
> Forming a ring, perhaps, or joining hands
> In games whose very names we have forgotten.
> Come, memory, let us seek them there in the shadows.

Within the medium of the short poem, however, Justice has explored an extraordinary range of possibilities. The seventy-six poems gathered in *A Donald Justice Reader* constitute an encyclopedia of literary form and style. It is remarkable enough to find sonnets, villanelles, couplets, and sestinas coexisting in the same volume as surreal odes and aleatory "sonatinas"—not to mention poems based on blues lyrics and nursery rhymes. But surely it *is* unique to find all these styles handled with equal mastery, to see the same author use such apparently contradictory procedures to produce convincing poems. Whereas another writer might have borrowed an unfamiliar style to try something different in a new poem, Justice somehow managed to reinvent each manner from within. He created poems that were both strikingly different and yet recognizably his own.

Born in 1925, Justice began—like most of his generation's best poets—by writing for-

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mal verse. His early work rings with traditional music. It sometimes sounds as if Yeats had been transplanted to the American South. Listen to the opening of "Ladies by Their Windows":

> They lean upon their windows. It is late.
> Already it is twilight in the house;
> Autumn is in their eyes. Twilit, autumnal—
> Thus they regard themselves. What vanities!
> As if all nature were a looking-glass
> To publish the small features of their ruin!

Some readers have never forgiven Justice for abandoning this sonorous style, and one can understand their disappointment. (They will be further disappointed to learn this much-anthologized poem has been omitted from the *Reader*.) These early poems gorgeously demonstrate the magic of the old meters. But in the 1960s Justice—once again with most poets of his generation—discarded rhyme and meter for free verse. But whereas his contemporaries generally began writing autobiographical poems, Justice became a serious experimentalist. He not only discarded traditional form but also, eventually, conventional notions of genre, sequential exposition, originality, and even authorial control. "Experimental" poetry is usually a name given to an interesting artistic mess, the critical equivalent of an "A for effort." But Justice's experiments virtually all succeed. To each new method, he brought an extraordinary control, a *formal* tightness one rarely associates with experimental verse, especially the sort which displays no overt principals of organization. Much of Justice's innovative work is expansive and surreal, but sometimes it achieves an epiphanic minimalism, as in "The Thin Man" (quoted in full):

> I indulge myself
> In rich refusals.
> Nothing suffices.
>
> I hone myself to
> This edge. Asleep, I
> Am a horizon.

The careful reader will notice that this poem is written in syllabics. Gradually, Justice was working his way back to closed forms. By 1980 he was once again working primarily in meter, though his poems now addressed the autobiographical subjects that they had scrupulously avoided in the past.

The shape of Justice's poetic development may be interesting, but it is decidedly not what the author wants to communicate in *A Donald Justice Reader*. He has deliberately mixed his poems to hide their chronology. Instead he has arranged them loosely in thematic groups, as if to emphasize the consistency of his concerns across the different phases of his career. This decision suggests the author's sympathies lie not with critics, who find questions of overall artistic and stylistic growth paramount, but with the common reader, who cares mostly about the human content of individual poems.

A Donald Justice Reader ends with fifty-odd pages of prose—a memoir of childhood piano lessons in Depression-era Miami, two short stories, and three brief literary essays. I knew all of these pieces previously, but, rereading them with the special savor for design and detail that a second or third viewing allows, I felt a keen and unexpected disappointment. I wasn't disappointed with the selections. No, every one was perfect of its kind. My chagrin was with Justice. Why had someone this good written so little prose?

Perhaps the secret of Justice's reticence in prose is also the key to his skill. His prose is almost as concentrated as his verse. Every sentence carries a noticeable weight. Of course, the prose of poets is legendary for its density of local effect, especially in richness of description. Justice's special accomplishment is to have made his packed prose style both relaxed and immensely readable. One doesn't notice how much was said (or implied) until one looks at it carefully. Justice's story "Little Elegy for Cello and Piano," for instance, is only five pages long. The narrator remembers attending an afternoon concert at the Phillips Collection in Washington

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with his brother-in-law, a moderately well-known composer, who will die a few months later. Simple, intimate, and, yes, elegiac, the story is almost over before it begins. Yet how much we learn about the three main characters! Every detail discloses some crucial fact, sometimes about both the narrator and his subjects. This story is a joy to read, but what agony it must have been to write and rewrite. It is, however, futile to speculate on what Justice might have written, especially in the presence of all he has created. *A Donald Justice Reader* should be an occasion for celebration, not complaint. Anyone who worries that enduring poems are no longer being written should read this singularly impressive collection.

The great Galician novel

Emilia Pardo Bazán
The House of Ulloa.
Translated from the Spanish,
with an introduction,
by Paul O'Prey & Lucia Graves.
Penguin, 275 pages, $8.95 paper

The House of Ulloa.
Translated from the Spanish
by Roser Caminals-Heath.
University of Georgia Press,
323 pages, $35

reviewed by Lauren Weiner

After the end of the Golden Age, and until the advent of García Lorca, Spain lacked much of its former literary luster. From the late 1600s to the civil war of this century, it was almost as if the country had turned in upon itself to brood over its faded imperial splendor. Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921), a well-traveled Spanish aristocrat, autodidact, and standard-bearer of liberal monarchism, believed that the cure for Spain's cultural insulation was to import naturalism from across the Pyrenees—or at least those aspects of naturalism that a devout Catholic could accept. Pardo Bazán's *La cuestión palpitante* ("The Burning Question"), a series of newspaper columns in which she defended the exacting technique, if not the "heretical pessimism," of Emile Zola, set off a firestorm of debate among Spanish intellectuals when it was published in the early 1880s.

A brave and sagacious critic, Pardo Bazán was not out to offend the conservative sensibilities of her countrymen. Rather, she was engaged in a patriotic project to modernize Spanish letters, and so she measured Spanish works against the best that was known and thought in the world and let the chips fall where they may. Benito Pérez Galdós she compared to Dostoevsky, and found that the former survived the comparison. José María de Pereda she lined up against Balzac and Flaubert, and found the Spaniard wanting. Pereda's *El buey suelto* ("The Untethered Ox"), an indictment of the bachelor life, was, she wrote, an example of the novelist's failure to transcend his right-wing didacticism and chauvinistic love for the villages of his native Santander. Unlike his best work, this novel had been "born antiquated, like the finery contrived by country ladies." Pardo Bazán disdained above all else those writers she saw as mired in the Romanticism of a previous era. And yet, tellingly, in a long autobiographical essay she wrote in 1886 to accompany her new novel, *Los pazos de Ulloa* ("The House of Ulloa"),[1] she reveals a sneaking admiration for none other than Victor Hugo, Sir Walter Scott, and Bulwer-Lytton. Herein lies the irony of Emilia Pardo Bazán, the cutting-edge sophisticate who failed to free herself of the conventions of a fiction she frequently pronounced passé.

The House of Ulloa, the greatest of her nineteen novels, reflects this split identity, being sometimes a Gothic novel, sometimes a crude dramatization of the Darwinian principle. At its best—that is, when it is neither of these things—it is a fine social novel of

1 Both of the translations under review include this essay; Caminals-Heath translates it in full while O'Prey and Graves offer an abridged version.

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Spain in the throes of revolution and reaction. Of the two new English translations of this work, one by Paul O'Prey and Lucia Graves, the other by Roser Caminals-Heath, only the former is adept enough to enable us to savor the good in Pardo Bazán even as we wince a bit at the bad.

The story of *The House of Ulloa* is set during the "Glorious Revolution" of 1868, when a shaky coalition of liberal monarchists and republicans rose against Isabela II and deposed her. The liberal coup d'état—which incited the church-backed monarchists of the Right, the Carlists, to renew their guerrilla war in the countryside—paved the way for the creation of the First Spanish Republic. This was the bloody and brief prototype of the Second Republic curtailed by Franco in 1936.

For Pardo Bazán, no class better exemplified the chaos and drift of this historical moment than the decayed aristocracy of her native region, the northwestern province of Galicia. The Galician aristocrats, she believed, had degenerated because of their dependence on the laziest elements of the clergy and the most rapacious elements of the peasantry. In *The House of Ulloa*, Don Pedro Moscoso, a worthless upper-class twit, has allowed an abbot more interested in hunting than in ecclesiastical matters to keep his accounts. This sloppy stewardship of the Ulloa fortune enables Primitivo, the evil majordomo of the family estate, quietly to usurp Don Pedro's provincial clout and embezzle his wealth. When not out hunting or drinking, Don Pedro, a bachelor, dallies with Primitivo's buxom daughter. She serves the estate as chambermaid and cook, and her young son is generally assumed to be Don Pedro's.

Enter a new chaplain hired by Don Pedro to set his affairs in order. Father Julián, a sweetly pious and faint-hearted young scholar, is spooked by the creaky House of Ulloa and horrified at Don Pedro's libertine ways. He convinces his master to take a noble wife. She is a city girl, Marcelina Pardo de la Lage. Marcelina, called "Nucha," is a stock character of the Spanish novels of the period: the refined wife who either pines for a child to enliven her empty marriage or pours all her ardor into motherhood to compensate for the cruel indifference of her husband.

Nucha, though frail, has survived childbirth; her husband cares nothing for his infant daughter and even threatens to disinherit her. Thus does Don Pedro rather heavy-handedly enact in his own life the patriarchal vow at the center of the Carlist cause: to uphold the Salic Law barring women from the throne. Against a background of thunderstorms lashing the moss-covered walls of the manor house, and ominous footsteps sounding on the spiral stairs, Julián comes to suspect Don Pedro of beating Nucha. For her part, the neurasthenic Nucha suspects there is a plot afoot to kill her daughter so Primitivo's bastard grandson can inherit. The central dilemma is Julián's: his cowardice and his theological musings incline him to dismiss Nucha's sufferings as the prelude to heaven's reward; his love for her and her child pushes him toward rescuing them from the diabolical House of Ulloa.

There are some clues as to how Pardo Bazán's "Catholic naturalism" is intended to be a refinement of Zola's. On the one hand, it is Julián's "lymphatic temperament" that renders him unfit for "the phlegmatic heroism that only people with rich red blood and strong muscles are capable of." This is orthodox naturalism; biology determines character. However, and somewhat contradictorily, in the portrayal of Nucha —whom Julián esteems as the veritable reincarnation of the mother of Jesus—the causation is reversed. Nucha's saintliness ruined her health. As a youth she exhausted herself by carrying her younger brother around in her arms, then fell ill from frustrated devotion to him when he was sent away to school. The primacy of the soul in Nucha's case bears out Pardo Bazán's conviction, expressed in the introductory essay, that "human life is shaped by free will and fatality, whereas nature is shaped by fatality alone."

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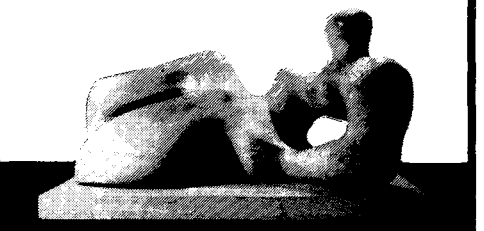
Refined or not, this is scientism in the service of hokey characterization and predictable plotting. And so, putting these flawed elements aside, we come finally to the glories of Pardo Bazán: her digressions. Her mastery of social types and of the political currents that swirled around the liberal revolution are unsurpassed in Spanish literature. The banquet scenes of *The House of Ulloa* are wonderful, whether they are roisterous gatherings (provincial priests swapping political anecdotes and dirty jokes around the meat- and mead-laden table) or staid ones (a decorous yet genuinely joyous wedding among the country gentry).

When Don Pedro is drafted by Carlist priests and politicos to run for office, the ensuing political campaign is hilarious. Pardo Bazán—the product of a family of liberal noblemen/politicians—revels in the electoral politics of a constitutional monarchy hobbled by disorganized movements of Right and Left. Well-meaning but gullible pollwatchers are no match for the dirty tricks of the local *caciques*, who barely conceal their hunger for power under national ideological banners. Not that the *caciques* are superhuman; the drunken partisan mobs they try to incite to violence show a slyly level-headed tendency to stop short of mayhem in order to preserve themselves.

Caminals-Heath simply does not do justice to the lusty rough and tumble of this novel. Her changes of Pardo Bazán's punctuation and sentence structure impair our ability to picture what the characters are doing. In expository passages, the alterations sometimes make nonsense of Pardo Bazán's logic. Too often the awkwardly literal translation is chosen instead of a more effective synonymous word or phrase. Caminals-Heath, who is presumably a native Spanish-speaker, is severely handicapped by her lack of an instinctive feel for the English language. When, for example, a child gambols in a kitchen full of adults having their supper, the diners are referred to not as adults or grown-ups but as "the rational group"—a literalism for the untranslatable Roman

Henry Moore
on Sculpture
edited by Philip James



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Catholic designation used by Pardo Bazán, *los racionales*, in the sense of "those past the age of reason."

O'Prey and Graves, presumably translating into their native language, are consistently clearer. They avoid awkward literalisms while nonetheless remaining true to the spirit of the original. They have improved on the first edition of this novel to appear in English, a graceful but somewhat archaic translation done by Ethel Harriet Hearn in 1908.

It must be pointed out that Hearn, dainty though she is, lets Pardo Bazán have her say (as do O'Prey and Graves) when the novelist puts an anti-Semitic comment into the mouth of a seedy liberal *cacique*. Caminals-Heath substitutes an illiterate remark for the bigoted one, probably to protect Pardo Bazán from being accused of bigotry herself. Such bowdlerizations strike at the heart of Pardo Bazán's conception of the new artistic desideratum: to record reality faithfully. Against Carlist novelists she defended her right to depict a priest as unheroic. Against writers on the "extremes of victorious liberalism" she defended her right to depict a progressive politician as something other than the innocent victim of theocracy. In the toughness of her moral judgments, if not in the props and gimmicks upon which her novels rely too heavily, Emilia Pardo Bazán did indeed transcend what she called "the edifying confections" of Romanticism.

The omelet of A. MacLeish

Scott Donaldson
(in collaboration with R. H. Winnick)
Archibald MacLeish: An American Life.
A Peter Davison Book/
Houghton Mifflin, 622 pages, $35

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

MacLeish died in 1982, a few days before his ninetieth birthday, laden with honors. His *Collected Poems* (1952) had won the Bollingen Prize, the National Book Award, the Shelley Memorial Award, and his second Pulitzer Prize. He went on to win a third Pulitzer, to become secretary of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, to accumulate dozens of medallions and decorations (both domestic and foreign), and to harvest enough honorary degrees, with academic hoods, to supply a whole Benedictine monastery. If Anne Sexton was the Judy Garland of American poetry—volatile, tasteless, self-destructive—MacLeish was its Eleanor Roosevelt, famous, as he self-reflectively said of his friend Mark Van Doren, for his goodness, his decency, and his rectitude.

Between 1978 and 1983 R. H. Winnick, the editor of MacLeish's *Letters* (1983), collected printed material, tape-recorded numerous interviews, and turned out a draft of six early chapters of this life. Then, for unspecified reasons, Winnick, having completed Lawrance Thompson's life of Frost, had his own biography of MacLeish completed by Scott Donaldson. This relay-writer has organized a massive amount of material into a thorough, accurate, and coherent narrative. Like his subject, it is competent, workmanlike—and dull. After a disastrous attempt at fine writing in the opening paragraph, the book moves along in clear but sometimes cliché-ridden prose. In three lines on MacLeish's prep school, for example, Donaldson writes that his third year was so "replete with accomplishments" that his final year "pale[d] in comparison," though his "own cup was about to spill over." When France falls in June 1940, he rises to the occasion by stating "the world had cracked open like an egg, revealing a vacancy at the heart of western civilization." Donaldson concentrates on external events and rarely penetrates the inner feelings and motives of this aloof, reserved, and secretive man. He moves rather mechanically from the thirty books to their strangely mixed reviews, from the public events to MacLeish's endless speeches about them. And he concludes with a series of inflated official tributes.

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MacLeish was fortunate in birth, wealth, education, and connections. He was born in Glencoe, Illinois, in 1892, the second son of a widower's third marriage. His fifty-four-year-old Glaswegian father, the self-made founder and manager of the Chicago department store Carson Pirie Scott, was a cold, remote, god-like figure, more like a foreign potentate than a member of the family. As boy and man, MacLeish strove unsuccessfully to win his father's affection and respect. But he always had the love of his warm-hearted mother, eighteen years younger than her husband, who was a graduate of and teacher at Vassar, and then principal of a ladies' seminary at Rockford, Illinois.

After a boring year at New Trier High School, MacLeish started over again at Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, where he was horribly homesick. He was a good scholar and athlete. But he found the headmaster loathsome, hypocritical, and snobbish, and, as he made clear when he returned to give a graduation speech, he really hated the place. Of the fifty-four Hotchkiss seniors, forty-two, including MacLeish, went on to Yale. In New Haven he began his lifelong friendship with Dean Acheson, played center on the football team, was tapped for Skull and Bones, became a member of Phi Beta Kappa in his junior year and an editor of the literary magazine. During his equally successful time at Harvard Law School, he became a disciple of Felix Frankfurter and was elected to the Law Review. Torn between law and poetry, he asked himself the unanswerable question: "Why should a first-rate lawyer become a second-rate poet?"

In 1916 MacLeish married the pregnant Ada Hitchcock. They had met five years earlier at Westover School in Connecticut, where his bossy maiden aunt was headmistress. Ada, a plump, attractive girl who became a professional singer, renounced her career to devote herself to her husband. As she told a friend, "I just have no real life apart from Archie." Ada was extremely conventional and socially proper, a charming wife and perfect hostess. Though married to MacLeish for sixty-five years, she remains in this book a vague and shadowy creature.

She seems to have been aware of her husband's love affairs: probably with the patrician Grace Peabody (then courted by and later married to his Yale friend) and the aristocratic Bostonian Margarett Sargent in 1917 (the year his first son was born); certainly with Margaret Bishop (the wife of his friend John Peale Bishop) in 1924, with the handsome British novelist Rosamond Lehmann in 1931, with Mina Kirstein (sister of the poet Lincoln Kirstein) in the mid-1930s, and with the beautiful young Catherine Carr, who accompanied him to South America, as a researcher, in 1938. Though it is notoriously difficult to discover details of secret love affairs, one would like to know a great deal more than Donaldson reveals about these women and to gain some insight into Ada's unusually tolerant attitude. Was she willing to put up with infidelities in order to remain his wife, or confident he would return to the patient Griselda when his passions had subsided? In what way did she "behave outrageously" at a party when they returned from France? And what substance was there to the rumors in Boston, which fueled MacLeish's fears of sexual betrayal, that she was "running around"?

During the Great War MacLeish wanted both to fight and to save himself for posterity. He originally joined the Yale Mobile Hospital Unit, transferred to Saumur for officers' training, was sent to the front as commanding officer of an artillery battery during the drive to Château-Thierry and (probably through his aunt's influence) was pulled out of that fierce battle to train draftees in the use of rifles at Camp Meade in Maryland.

In 1918 his younger brother was shot down while flying over Belgium. MacLeish memorialized his death by changing his son's name from Archibald to Kenneth and by writing a poem, "Kenneth," which, when compared to Yeats's "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," reveals its manifest mediocrity:

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He had no dream
Who was himself a music and a flame,
Who sought not glory, but himself became
The glory of his victories.

After the war, MacLeish briefly taught government at Harvard and then joined a prestigious Boston law firm. Despite success at the bar, he abandoned law for poetry and, supported by his father, sailed in 1923 for five years in Paris. There he met Hemingway, Joyce, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, Bishop, and the suavely hedonistic Murphys, and published five books in one lustrum.

MacLeish and Fitzgerald followed a similar pattern of friendship with Hemingway. Hemingway would compete advantageously with them, accuse them of selling out to *Fortune* or to Hollywood, and harshly criticize their works. Though wounded by his outbursts, both older men retained their hero-worship until Hemingway finally broke with them. In 1931 MacLeish and Hemingway quarreled bitterly during a fishing trip in Key West (where Fitzgerald never dared to visit). Two years later, fearing that Hemingway's fierce competitiveness would turn a holiday into a daily struggle for superiority, MacLeish refused Hemingway's invitation to an African safari, paid for by his wife's Uncle Gus. In 1940 MacLeish wrote a hopelessly ill-founded attack on *A Farewell to Arms*, criticizing its defeatist attitude and its "passionate contempt for the statements of conviction" that had been used to justify the war in 1917-18.

MacLeish's relations with his three children were also unhappy. Though he deeply resented his father's sternness and lack of sympathy, he treated his own children with the same mixture of severity and indifference. Irritated by his son Kenneth, who had suffered a bout of polio as an infant, he either ignored the boy or bullied him mercilessly. When the boy grew up, MacLeish never bothered to read his published essays. And when Kenneth died of cancer in 1976, he was still trying to discover whether his father loved him.

Ada, completely absorbed in her husband, had no time or love (as if these were finite quantities) left over for her neglected children. Their daughter, Mimi, rebelled against her mother's strict notions of social decorum; and her father, the great democrat, opposed her marriage to the son of working-class parents. When their granddaughter wanted to marry a Harvard man, Ada, wrongly fearing he might be Jewish, tried to discourage her by saying, "Of course we're not anti-Semitic, but family is so important."

After returning from Paris, MacLeish worked effectively from 1929 to 1938 for Henry Luce's business magazine, *Fortune*. He got the choice assignments, traveled widely, and earned one of the highest salaries in American journalism. In 1938 he spent a year as director of the Nieman program of fellows in journalism at Harvard. The following year Frankfurter recommended him to Roosevelt as Librarian of Congress.

Donaldson, with the indispensable help of MacLeish's former secretary, is especially good on his years at the Library of Congress. Between 1939 and 1944 MacLeish served as unofficial minister of culture. With extraordinary speed of movement, thought, and expression, he transformed that backward institution into an efficient modern organization. Though he appointed the eminent exile Thomas Mann as consultant in German literature, the two men, both terribly conscious of their reputation and dignity, could not unbend enough to become close friends.

In October 1941, just before America entered the war, Roosevelt (whom he saw socially) appointed MacLeish director of the Office of Facts and Figures, which disseminated information about national defense. MacLeish's criticism of J. Edgar Hoover's attempts to smear his political enemies and willingness to speak out on controversial issues led to the potentially damaging compilation of his six-hundred-page FBI file. Despite Hoover's formidable hostility, in 1945 Roosevelt appointed him assistant secretary of state for cultural and public af-

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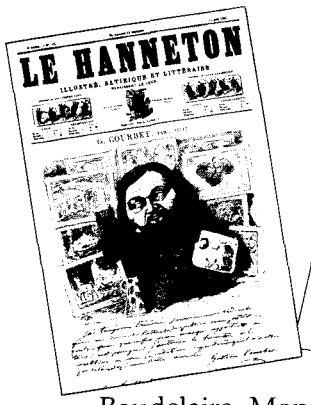

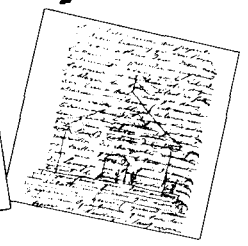

LETTERS OF
Gustave Courbet

Edited and translated by
Petra ten-Doesschate Chu

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fairs. MacLeish was capably assisted by Adlai Stevenson and wrote the preamble to the charter of the United Nations. In 1946 he refused an offer to become the first director of UNESCO (a post which went to Julian Huxley). In 1958, with the help of Frost and Hemingway, he secured Ezra Pound's release from Saint Elizabeth's Hospital.

From 1949 to 1961 he was Boylston Professor of Rhetoric at Harvard, where his writing class inspired a number of talented pupils. But he twice rejected John Updike for this class and afterward pretended that Updike had never bothered to apply. MacLeish discovered Antigua in 1950, built a house there, and spent the next seventeen winters on that Caribbean island. He had a Broadway hit in 1958 with *J. B.*, his dramatic version of the Book of Job. The envious Frost (speaking no doubt from his own experience) criticized its optimistic conclusion by observing: "People think everything is solved by love, but maybe just as many things are solved by hate." When MacLeish died after an operation for obstruction of the bowel, he left an estate of nearly a million dollars.

Donaldson explains how MacLeish achieved his impressive worldly success. But he provides little insight about the meaning of the poems and does not make a persuasive case for his significance as a poet. Instead, he rather surprisingly declares that he "came back from Paris in 1928 one of the leading poets of his country and his time."

MacLeish, a conventional poet in the tradition of the English Georgians, was also an echo-chamber of his most brilliant avant-garde contemporaries: of Eliot in *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* (1928), of Pound in *Conquistador* (Pound called it "damn bad" but it won the Pulitzer in 1933), of Yeats in the poems of old age in *Riders on the Earth* (1978). These poems defined him, as Rolfe Humphries acutely noted, as no more than "a talented, industrious and successful mimic of poetic activity."

In his famous Horatian poem, "Ars Poetica" (1925), MacLeish concluded, "A

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poem should not mean / But be." But he went on to write a great quantity of poems that "mean." As he suppressed his lyric instinct, became a cultural icon, and moved from poetry to social protest, adopting a high-sounding, ceremonial, propagandistic public voice, Morton Dauwen Zabel rightly spoke of "the open banality" of "You, Andrew Marvell" and "the limp humility" of "American Letter" (overburdened with relative and demonstrative pronouns): "this, this is our land, this is our people, / This that is neither a land nor a race." MacLeish's awkward attempts at hard-nosed proletarian speech in *Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City* (1933)—"She's a tough land under the corn, mister"—and the solemn portentousness of *America Was Promises* (1939)—"Tom Paine knew. / Tom Paine knew the People"—were even greater failures.

MacLeish said of Edmund Wilson—who once refused on aesthetic grounds to shake hands with him—"he's a damn fine critic and I wish I could please him." But Wilson's deadly parody, "The Omelet of A. MacLeish" (1939), cut to the heart of his poetic defects. Wilson accused him of slavishly imitating his betters and of changing his convictions to curry favor on the Left. Even MacLeish, whose work was based more on ambition and industry than on artistic and emotional intensity, was forced to recognize his own limitations. As he honestly told Amy Lowell (in a passage omitted by Donaldson): "This rhythm and vocabulary which my intelligence knows for second rate are me, my 'style,' all that I have."

The political Delacroix

Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer
Eugène Delacroix:
Prints, Politics & Satire, 1814-1822.
Yale University Press, 153 pages, $40

reviewed by Karen Wilkin

Between 1814 and 1822, the young Eugène Delacroix produced sixteen political cartoons, the first and last of his career. They have been listed among his oeuvre since it was first catalogued, but they seem to have been something of an embarrassment to Delacroix scholars, who generally have mentioned them only in passing and without admiration. The most comprehensive article on the satirical cartoons, published in 1930, is entitled—significantly—"Eugène Delacroix's Youthful Sins." Yet Nina Maria Athanassoglou-Kallmyer, the author of the first major study devoted to this problematic body of work, takes quite a different view, arguing for the importance of the caricatures within Delacroix's evolution, however atypical they may seem to be on first acquaintance.

Delacroix probably made the cartoons chiefly in order to earn much-needed money when he was an aspiring art student and, slightly later, a fledgling painter just beginning to exhibit ambitious efforts. The end of his career as a political cartoonist, in fact, corresponds precisely with his success at the Salon of 1822, when the *Barque of Dante* was purchased by the State for 2,000 francs; this solved his financial difficulties for the moment and allowed him to concentrate exclusively on being a "serious painter." Miss Athanassoglou suggests that Delacroix may have stopped publishing cartoons because he felt that it was unsuitable once he began to be recognized for his Salon submissions. Yet, far from disavowing his early caricatures as "youthful sins," he insisted that they be included in the comprehensive catalogue of his graphic work made in his own lifetime, since he esteemed them as precursors of later developments. Miss Athanassoglou follows Delacroix's lead, seeing in the caricatures key elements of the mature painter's approach, early evidence of his commitment to the period's most modern notions, to advanced ideas of Romanticism.

Why then have the cartoons been largely ignored by scholars? Miss Athanassoglou declares that it is quite simply because they *are* cartoons. Political caricatures is so topical that it transcends its time with the

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greatest of difficulty. Engagé satire is so much part of the transient baggage of the moment that it becomes virtually unintelligible once that moment has passed. Political cartoons assume an audience capable of recognizing oblique, shorthand references to the issues and the notables of the day. Parisians of 1815, for example, could instantly translate an image of a resplendently uniformed fat man into an allusion to the rotund Louis XVIII, but for present-day viewers, the image is simply that of a tubby person in an old-fashioned costume. And so on. Moreover, caricatures and cartoons have traditionally been seen as belonging to something other than high art. For all of these reasons, Miss Athanassoglou states, "Delacroix's youthful graphic works, mundane in content and grotesque in form, appeared as not only the absolute negation of the sublime aspirations of his paintings, but also, in their lighthearted irreverence, as unfortunate blemishes defacing the lofty image of the artist respectfully preserved by his biographers."

In other words, Delacroix's political cartoons belonged not only to a very particular moment but also to a world of popular culture, a world to which the young man —only eighteen when he made his first caricature—was briefly drawn but which he later renounced, as a serious artist, for the sake of high art. In the 1990s, of course, we are enjoined not to make distinctions between the artifacts of popular culture and those of high art. In some circles, the very notion of "high art"—presented in derogatory quotation marks—is despised and ridiculed; the orthodox call it all, high or low, "cultural production." No wonder Delacroix's throwaway political cartoons are being examined with close attention for the first time in more than half a century.

The intellectual climate being what it is, it would not be unreasonable to expect a book such as Miss Athanassoglou's to be an exercise in modish deconstruction, since its thesis is the importance of little-known, "marginalized" works—albeit by an acknowledged master—that were aimed at a broad audience. Happily, *Eugène Delacroix: Prints, Politics and Satire, 1814-1822*, turns out to be something quite other. It is a scholarly, thoughtful reassessment based on scrupulous research that sets obscure works in an illuminating context. Mercifully free of jargon and fashionable locutions, the tight, sharply focused text genuinely makes us look at the works in question—and a great many others relating to them—in a new, more informed way. Admittedly, you come away feeling you have learned far more about French politics of the period, about the intricacies of the Bourbon restoration and the conflicts between opposing factions, even about the revolutionary nature of Gioacchino Rossini's operas, than about Delacroix, but that somehow seems appropriate, rather than irritating, given the essential modesty of the caricatures as works of art. When, in fact, the author makes aesthetic claims for the cartoons that they simply can't support, she is at her least persuasive.

The last chapter, "The Comic as Dissent and Modernity," strives to come to grips with the role of humor in Delacroix's cartoons and, by extension, with the larger and more elusive issue of the sense of humor of early-nineteenth-century Paris. It's an ambitious undertaking, and generally Miss Athanassoglou acquits herself well, although the chapter is marred by excrutiatingly ponderous descriptions of just what is happening in the cartoons under discussion. (I suspect that the problem has some relation to a useful rule learned early by all sensible polyglots: "never tell jokes in a language not your own.") Yet despite the occasional clunkiness of her prose, Miss Athanassoglou is generally informative and often downright enlightening. She asks probing questions about the meaning of comedy in the early days of the Bourbon restoration and makes a convincing case for the subversive nature of the comic, the vernacular, and the grotesque, even for their radical modernity, in the context of the high-minded Classicism espoused by the French cultural establishment of the time.

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Obviously, any reading of Delacroix's satirical caricatures demands an understanding of the political situation that provoked them, just as any evaluation of the works' merits demands an awareness of related works of the time. And it was an extraordinary period. During the eight years in which Delacroix functioned as a political caricaturist, France was in a state of upheaval. Eighteen-fourteen was marked by Napoleon's first resignation and the restoration of the deposed Bourbon monarchy under Louis XVIII; this was followed, in March 1815, by Napoleon's return to power; in June, the Empire was brought to an abrupt end by the Battle of Waterloo; and July saw the second Bourbon restoration. Political feeling ran high. On the left, forward-looking Liberals sided with Bonapartists. Both leftists and centrists were opposed to the extreme Right, whose adherents, nostalgic for the values of the Ancien Régime, welcomed the aristocrats, prudent émigrés during the Revolution, who now began to return to France to take up once again lives of privilege and influence. Superannuated aristocratic incompetents, such as the captain responsible for the disastrous shipwreck of the *Medusa*, and their no more qualified children, resumed positions of leadership in the military, at the expense of experienced Liberals and Bonapartists, infuriating Frenchmen of all political stripes. When, in the Salon of 1819, Géricault exhibited his savage version of conditions on the *Medusa*'s improvised, overloaded raft, he called the picture simply *A Shipwreck*, but everyone immediately recognized the allusion and the subversive nature of the painting, despite its veneer of feverish classicism. It was as timely and revealing as Géricault's earlier portraits of weary, un-heroic officers, the disillusioned veterans of the Napoleonic Army. That army was further demoralized by drastic reductions during the first Bourbon restoration; large numbers of officers —including one of Delacroix's brothers— were put on half-pay. (This decrease in his family income, along with the death of his mother not long before, were factors that made even the small sums to be made from political cartooning necessary to the young painter.) To deepen the general sense of malaise, after the debacle of Waterloo France was saddled with a greedy occupying force, which it was required by the terms of surrender to feed, house, and clothe.

As Miss Athanassoglou describes it, "the period was one of instability, rapid political shifts, ideological diversity and social re-stratification, an ideal setting for the emergence of satirical polemic." That the tensions and disputes of the period would define themselves in the form of satirical *images* depended on two factors: a brief period of relatively lax censorship of such images—compared to far tighter restrictions under Napoleon and after about 1820—and the increased popularity of the lithographic medium, a rapidly developing way of making multiple images cheaply and quickly that, unlike etching or other traditional methods, demanded no special skill of the artist other than the ability to draw that he already possessed.

Miss Athanassoglou presents a wide selection of political cartoons of the period, decoding their symbols, deciphering their references, so that it begins to become evident just where the young Delacroix fits into his time, both aesthetically and politically. Some contemporary examples reveal themselves as possible influences on both his cartoon imagery and drawing style, while others help to explain what his political views were—at least as he expressed them in his cartoons. We begin to recognize the difference between the extreme right-wing proponents of the values of the Ancien Régime (and of the solemn values of official Classicism), with their powdered queues, knee breeches, outmoded coats and hats, and their opponents, the energetic young liberals, with their loose-flowing, unpowdered hair, long trousers, up-to-the-minute cutaways and tall hats. We begin to notice, under Miss Athanassoglou's guidance, that while the rightists are old and crabbed, the leftists are almost always young and smiling.

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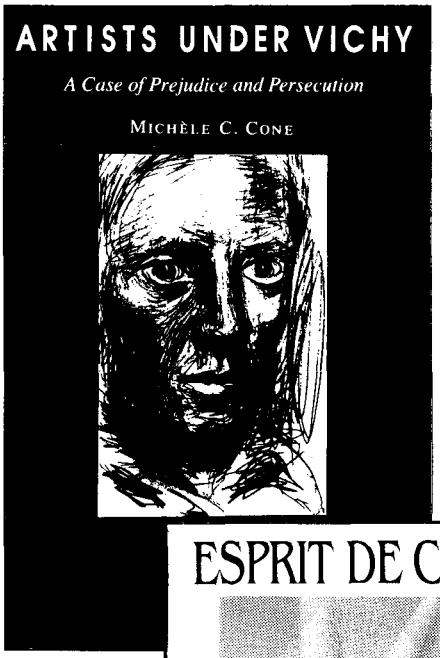

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It's partly a symbolic conceit: the aged personification of the Right, in eighteenth-century clothes, to parallel his outmoded beliefs, laments a vanished past, while the Left, a young man of the present in fashionable clothes, laughs at his distressed opposite. Laughter was, of necessity, one of the chief weapons of young liberals; the voting age of the period was forty—males only, of course. Youth was depicted as both a sign and a condition of liberalism, just as the smile, evidence of an appreciation of the comic, was offered as both a sign and a condition of a modern emphasis, clearly shared by Delacroix, on the value of feeling and the life of the emotions.

The bitter humor of the period comes most alive in a series of cartoons dealing with three fictional "secret societies," the Order of the Weathervane, the Order of the Crayfish, and the Knights of the Candle-Snuffer, invented by a widely read satirical magazine as a device to ridicule the most reactionary political elements of the day. The cartoons skewered prominent figures of the Right, thinly disguised by absurd, often rudely punning names, by listing them as honorary members of the three societies. The order of the Weathervane, whose members included Talleyrand, required an aspiring member to provide "prior proof to have changed his convictions at least three consecutive times and to have served at least three different governments." The name of the Order of the Crayfish was inspired by its eponymous crustacean's habit of moving backward, just as its members did in their longing for the past and regressive policies. Depending on their eminence or importance, members were classified as shrimp, crayfish, or lobsters.

The Knights of the Candle-Snuffer, whose symbol was a pointed cap, at once like the homely instrument that gave the society its name and a dunce cap, with all its connotations of stupidity and inability to learn, were those most zealous in their antipathy to light—that is to say, to enlightenment and truth. Their charter obliged members to "hate philosophy, liberal ideas, the constitutional charter." (Miss Athanassoglou usually translates "éteignoir" as the lumpish "candle-extinguisher," which sounds like something from one of those new-minted, not-quite-English sets of instructions we all cherish when we find them in European hotel rooms. Equally peculiar is a reference to "a game of draughts," a Britishism that seems affected in a book published in the U.S. and written by a member of an American university faculty; and where on earth did she get the idea that the pieces used to play checkers—or draughts, if you insist—are called "chips"?)

Emblems of all three "societies" quickly entered the visual language of satire of the period, with the pointed candle-snuffer becoming, according to Miss Athanassoglou, "an instant symbol of political subversion." Even the most innocuous figure in a pointed nightcap could be read, by the initiated, as a sharp political dig. By 1820, Delacroix, too, was using this convenient shorthand, the "cryptic symbols of the dissenting underground," to give vent unequivocally to his views in his caricatures, and continued to use them, more or less explicitly, for the rest of his short career as political satirist.

It's all lively, vivid, immensely entertaining, and, for the most part, extremely readable. What is disappointing is the poor quality and reduced size of the illustrations, almost all in black and white, despite the use of color in many of the originals. Much is lost in any reproduction, of course, but it seems perverse that the works under discussion in this book, made in the first place to disseminate opinion and information *through visual means*, should be so badly served by present-day technology. Not only is trenchant imagery blurred and generalized but essential details are rendered invisible. In addition, many of the cartoons include considerable text passages—labels, name-tags, "spoken" phrases in balloons, asides, captions, and the like—that are unreadable at the scale of reproduction. Much of this text material is discussed by the author, as are many meaningful details of drawing, and it is

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extremely frustrating not to be able to see them for ourselves. The vividness of the few Delacroix cartoons reproduced at decent size (one example is seen twice in color, as the frontispiece and again, even larger, on the front jacket) makes it all the more evident that we are missing a great deal. It can't be that the author feared that French texts would be unintelligible to her readers, since she does not hesitate to include untranslated French citations in her discussions. Rather, this downplaying of visual evidence, or, more accurately, this assumption that verbal description is an adequate substitute for visual evidence, is the one aspect of the book that seems to reflect current attitudes toward the value of the work of art as a work of art.

Miss Athanassoglou's text, for all its declared origins in "a conviction that marginal and even whimsical forms of artistic expression matter, and that the periphery defines the center as much as it is defined by it," is a serious and genuinely informative piece of scholarship. Knowing more about Delacroix's sixteen political cartoons adds to the sum of what we know about the painter of *Liberty Leading the People* and makes us look at that celebrated and familiar image with new eyes, even if it doesn't in any way explain why the painting is as good as it is.

It is ironic—and profoundly disappointing—that such an informative and engaging study should be marred by the publisher's apparent contempt for the images that provoked the study in the first place, by the assumption that reading about something is as good as or better than *seeing*. I have gone to exhibitions of conceptual art to find that there *was* no appreciable difference between the experience of being there and that of reading an article about the show. Does Yale University Press really believe Eugène Delacroix was a conceptual artist manqué?

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Letters

Old Mozart, old pianos

To the Editors:

I have just read Samuel Lipman's "Old Mozart and the New Past" (March 1992), and I think it warrants a response—not a refutation, but rather an account of the grounds that have led me to do what I do. What comes across most strongly in Mr. Lipman's article is incredulity: how can anyone choose to play (or to listen to, for that matter) the eighteenth-century Viennese fortepiano, an instrument with such obvious tonal and expressive drawbacks?

I don't believe in responding to reviewers; as I like to put it, "We players have our jobs, the audience has their job, and the reviewer has his job." Recently, however, I was told by two *very* different musicians (Roger Norrington and György Sándor) that one should sometimes write reviewers—not to rebut what they have said but to enlighten them, to help them in their endeavors. This is what this note will attempt to do.

There are some aspects of Mr. Lipman's review I cannot address, and others I believe I can. Since I do not know him, I may be interpreting wrongly what he says on page 31, but he seems to say that the development of the Steinway from what it was one hundred years ago to a more brilliant piano today is an "improvement"; the new Steinway is better. The only other modern piano mentioned is the German Steinway, said to be mellower and more old-fashioned; we seem to understand from Mr. Lipman's description that those who favored this sound showed "revulsion for the ambiance of contemporary life." No mention is made of any other piano: Bösendorfer, Bechstein, Mason & Hamlin, etc.

Now from my point of view one of the most depressing things about the modern-piano world at the present time is the fact that "variety" is the German Steinway *vs.* the American Steinway. The recordings of Edwin Fischer, Cortot, Lipatti, Clara Haskil, Gieseking—all of those piano sounds are lost; the diversity that used to exist has been swept aside for the Steinway ideal. I learned a few years ago that both Bechstein and Bösendorfer have switched from the old Langer-type action to a Steinway-type action; Yamaha uses a Steinway-type action; recently, in Finland, I saw my first Fazioli, a beautiful instrument: I pulled the action out to find the Steinway mechanism. I have always loved pianos, even before I knew any earlier models; to me Bechstein and Mason & Hamlin were *different* from each other, so were Steinway and Bösendorfer; I felt that these differences were exciting and enriched my musical sensibilties—but this is all gone. And it is gone, if I read Mr. Lipman correctly, for good reason, for there has simply been "development." This is a point of view that I simply have never been able to understand. What about those recordings of Schnabel and Cortot—is it Mr. Lipman's opinion that they would have been done better on a 1992 Steinway? (He surely knows how much Schnabel disliked Steinways; Schnabel expressed himself often on that subject.)

Further, in Mr. Lipman's final paragraph he says that it is difficult to tell the young authentic-performance audience that they are "wrong" to like what they heard at our concert. But I was

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under the impression that art is not science: there is no right or wrong, there is only aesthetics. Aesthetics means that each of us has to choose what he would like to spend his time with. I may certainly prefer my taste to Mr. Lipman's, but how can I tell him that his is "wrong"? So I feel that on these matters I cannot offer much.

What I can perhaps provide, however, is some help with his incredulity. Why do I choose to play on these earlier instruments rather than on a modern piano (of whatever make)? My answer is a simple one—greater musical expression. My feeling when listening to Mozart (let's leave out other composers for the moment) on a modern piano is that it is so bland! It is bland for a couple of reasons. First of all, the tone life of the modern piano is very long; actually its development is rather slow on a good one (the kind Mr. Lipman would think doesn't sound like an upright. In fact, it is probably the quick attack and rapid decay of the eighteenth-century piano that brings him to call it "upright-like"). For long singing lines the longer the tone the better, but just look at a Mozart score: where are those long lines? A perusal of virtually any Mozart score shows short, articulatory slurs over two or three notes (sometimes over more notes, but not often), and eighteenth-century sources are clear in describing how the notes under these slurs are to be executed for a maximum of expressive power. Such articulations simply are not heard in modern performance on the later piano; they are inevitably replaced by a "long singing line," of the type I was taught by all my teachers. I often cite the beginning of the Mozart F major Sonata, K.332/i, where each bar is under an individual slur. These single-bar slurs are in every so-called "Urtext" edition, but I have never heard them played by anyone on the modern piano. Eighteenth-century sources tell us that such two-note figures are "sighs"; the greater the difference in length and loudness between the first and the second, the greater the *expressivity*. If on a modern piano one were to play the second note softer than the first in any reasonable tempo, it would be inaudible, since the first note has barely got going and its richness would cover up the second, softer one. I could go on like this for pages. As I hear Mozart played by modern pianists, there is hardly one bar that is played according to what eighteenth-century sources tell us should be expressed; it sounds to my ears lovely, sweet, but uninflected and basically quite tame; in other words, just the *opposite* of what Mr. Lipman seems to hear in my playing. I spend all my time trying to develop this kind of rhetorical language, and when I hear the best modern performances they seem too smooth and undifferentiated, bland. Since Mr. Lipman spends his time with the modern piano, I presume he does not hear those things I consider important—his ears are searching for other musical values, and *indeed why wouldn't they*?

Yesterday, on the car radio, the Mozart D major Sonata for Piano and Violin K.306 was playing; I came in in the middle of the third movement. Very lovely, *very* bland. All the virtuosic fun of the third movement had very little rhythmic drive, and when it got to the quite riotous place where the piano plays heavy repeated chords in the bass register, there was *nothing*; but indeed how could there be? When modern pianists play Mozart, the lower the range the weaker one plays, generally; with the heavy overstrung bass, one just can't do otherwise without sounding ridiculously bombastic. Now all pianos of all periods are strongest in the bass, and good composers have always known how to utilize this: look at Liszt, Bartók, Rachmaninoff for the modern piano. Actually, I wonder whether the pianist in that recording (one of our very best, incidentally) has any idea of what such a passage is about. After all, Mozart wrote it for the bass of the "piano" as he knew it. The bass of the modern piano is so different that our pianist might easily be unaware of the effect Mozart imagined. (Any pianist who has heard, for instance, the *Allegro Barbaro* of Bartók played only on a straight-strung piano might miss the point of the basses in that piece in a similar way.)

Finally, I wonder how much Mr. Lipman has had to do with electronic pianos; I have had very little to do with them, and have not liked much of what I have heard. But in recent years there apparently have been quantum leaps made in the sound of such pianos, and some people think that they will replace acoustic pianos in the next century. They probably will. Mr. Lipman and I won't like it, but it will happen nonetheless. And maybe in about a hundred years a reincarnation

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of Mr. Lipman or me will discover one of these old acoustic Steinways and think that the music of Debussy or Rachmaninoff might sound different if played on one of them. There will be a reviewer who will be incredulous: "Why, you can't even vary the tone once the key is depressed, the tonal range is limited, the finger has to contend with that intricate system of levers in the action—all of that was done away with with good reason. What could possibly induce these young players to want to use such a primitive instrument?"

I hope Mr. Lipman takes these remarks in the spirit I send them. For me it is very important to have cordial relations with other musicians, differences of taste notwithstanding. And the preceding paragraph is not in the least meant to be ironical; I do think it will happen.

Malcolm Bilson
Ithaca, NY

Samuel Lipman replies:

Last things first: I am happy to take Mr. Bilson's remarks in the spirit he sends them. I trust that he will take these few comments of mine on his most interesting letter in a similar way; I too believe that performers, audiences, and reviewers have their jobs, and I also believe that even reviewers can "enlighten" performers, "to help them in their endeavors."

Mr. Bilson raises several related questions in his letter. They are (in my summary) as follows: Is the modern piano an "improvement" on the fortepiano? Is there an important difference in the modern piano between American and German Steinways on the one hand, and Bösendorfer, Bechstein, and Mason & Hamlin, et al., on the other? Is not the fortepiano more "expressive" in the playing of Mozart than a modern piano? Are we bound by Mozart's having written for the fortepiano he knew rather than for the modern piano he could not have known? What would I (or rather my reincarnation—pleasant thought, that!) say a hundred years from now when musicians comfortable with electronic instruments want to play Debussy or Rachmaninoff on them? I will try to answer these questions *seriatim*.

Is the modern piano an "improvement" on the fortepiano? My cautious answer is that it is an improvement because it can do much of the best that the fortepiano can do—provide the kind of singing melodic line that the harpsichord could not—and at the same time do what the fortepiano cannot—provide clarity of pitch below middle C. It can do both these things better in the very music that Mr. Bilson plays, both in principle and under modern conditions of performance in large concert halls. The fortepiano, simply in terms of its output of sound, is puny compared to the modern piano; large concert halls are notorious for consuming the sound of instruments before that sound has a chance to reach the audience.

Is there an important difference between the American and German Steinways and such of their present competitors as the Austrian Bösendorfer and the German Bechstein and the old Mason & Hamlin? The Bösendorfer is a small-sounding but rich-sounding instrument, with some beautiful notes just below high C, and grave problems of pitch definition in its bottom two octaves. I have not played any new Bechstein concert grands in some years, but I remember them as having the bass problems of the Bösendorfer, though to a more limited extent, and a treble register with a quite enticing bell-like quality. The old Mason & Hamlin—and by "old" I mean concert grands made before 1930 if not even earlier—also combined a lovely treble with a fuzzy and boomy bass. Mechanically, all these pianos are easier—that is, lighter—to play than Steinways. This lightness (which might also be called an absence of resistance to the finger depressing the key) makes them more comfortable for the pianist to play; it also, in my opinion, deprives the pianist of an important means of varying the quality of the tone produced by the piano at his direction.

It is clear that the Steinway, whether American or German, is a compromise between the need for an attractive treble and the need for a clear bass, united in an even scale that carries to the farthest reaches of even very large halls. Within the Steinway family, as I remarked in my March article, there is an important difference between the American and the German Steinway, with the American being both more brilliant and more difficult to play, and the German being both

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more mellow and easier to play. It must be added that there can be enormous differences between American Steinway concert grands: in the past, one of the chief glories of the best American Steinways had been the existence of quite individual-sounding instruments, with remarkable variation in brilliance, richness, articulation, volume, and relationship between different registers. It is my impression that new American Steinway concert grands are much more uniformly brilliant and large-toned.

Is the fortepiano not more "expressive" in the keyboard music of Mozart than a modern piano? Here is the nub of Mr. Bilson's position. There is a complex and ultimately quite subtle issue involved in this question. What Mr. Bilson has in mind, it seems to me, is the tone-quality of individual notes, as well as the weakness of the bass in relation to the treble (as compared to modern pianos). The tone-quality is certainly different from that of a modern piano: the treble is less metallic, with many extra, ill-defined (in pitch) vibrations contributing to a quite fruity sound. Furthermore, the fortepiano tone is indeed quite short, with a strong attack, and a much quicker decay than a modern piano. This characteristic, for Mr. Bilson, enables him to play the well-known opening of the F major Sonata K.331 as a succession of quite disjunct bars; for those of an older persuasion, this glorious melody is to be played, as it were, in one breath, with Mozart's own phrasing only suggesting emphasis rather than separation. Mr. Bilson, in this case at least, takes Mozart's two-note slurs literally, as precluding a long musical line; I would suggest that the slurs are modeled on violin bowing practices, with each new beginning demanding a new bow direction, but not an interruption in the melodic line. Thus to my mind, the expressivity Mr. Bilson finds in the fortepiano here precludes the larger expressivity that the modern piano makes possible—even in Mozart.

Are we bound by the fact that Mozart could not have written for the modern piano because it had not yet been invented? Composers—at least in my experience of living specimens of the breed—write with two kinds of sound in mind: the sound made by the instruments they know and the sounds that exist only in their minds' ears, and which may or may not find adequate representation in contemporary instruments. I believe it true that in the past most composers welcomed new developments in instruments, when such developments made the realization of the purer music the composers had projected in their minds more accurate. Is the sound of the modern piano close enough to what Mozart might have accepted as being a useful improvement? I believe that it is, though such a statement can remain no more than a speculation.

I also think that something else is involved in Mr. Bilson's consciousness of the expressive sound of the fortepiano. It is well known that all musical instruments sound quite different close-up—and therefore sound quite different to the player—than they do at a distance out in the hall. Much of the richness that Mr. Bilson finds in the fortepiano tone, I submit, is inextricably bound up with his own experience of playing these instruments over many years; I am afraid that what is heard in the audience is, rather than the close-up richness, the "thwacking" sound made when the hammers hit the strings, with the tone remaining somewhat unsustained because of the limitations of the instrument.

And so at long last, we come to the future. What about the use that will undoubtedly be made in the future of what I think are these ghastly electronic keyboard noiseboxes? I have no trouble in saying that Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi are best played on old Italian string instruments (or the best modern copies thereof) rather than on transistorized simulators. The Cremonese instruments—Amati, Stradivari, and Guarneri—cannot be "improved" on, for they are ultimate developments of their type. So it is with the best modern pianos; they too are ultimate developments of their type, a type which includes both the harpsichord and the fortepiano. It must be remembered that electronic instruments are *qualitatively* different from their "acoustic" counterparts, because their playing depends not upon physical effort, as do acoustic instruments, but upon their being plugged into the wall.

But what I have said above about the great string instruments and about the best modern pianos applies only to the entire body of music for which they were made and on which they can be played. Clearly Mr. Bilson and I would differ about whether Mozart belongs to the family of

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music which can be played on the modern piano; I doubt very much whether we would disagree about the suitability of the great string music for the old Italian instruments. What the truly new instruments—instruments, as I have said, that use an entirely different principle of power for their playing—require is a truly new music written expressly for them. Neither Mr. Bilson nor I—I hope I am not misrepresenting him—is willing to accept such new music as has been written for these new instruments as great art. Because of this melancholy fact, neither he nor I looks forward to the future with much hope. So, in the meantime, I look for my favorite piano in the recent past, and he looks for his in an older past. Our quarrels are within the family of the Western classical-music tradition; for both of us the new world waits to be born. *Hoch* Sony, *Hoch* Yamaha? I doubt it very much, but who knows . . .

Cummings & Gaston Lachaise

To the Editors:

Thank you for Karen Wilkin's piece on Gaston Lachaise, especially for the connection it makes between the sculptor and the poet e. e. cummings ("'Woman' & Gaston Lachaise," March 1992). Cummings too can shock us with what he sees in his Her—there's fierce sexuality within his verse.

You might care, incidentally, to correct a typographical error. The first line (and a beat) of the sonnet quoted by Wilkin reads:

> the poem her belly marched through me as
> one army.

Thomas Putnam
Buffalo, NY

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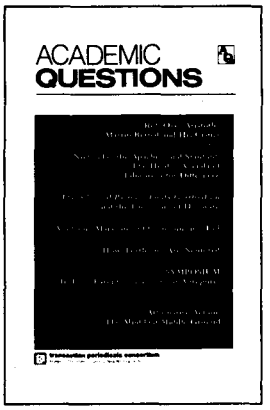

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